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HER OWN FAULT.

VOL. III.

HER OWN FAULT.

BY

MRS. J. K. SPENDER,

AUTHOR OF

“BROTHERS-IN-LAW,”

&c. &c.

“Gott hat Seelen in Staub gesenkt, damit sie durch Irrthümer zur Wahrheit hindurchbrächen, und durch Fehler zur Tugend, und durch Leiden zur Glückseligkeit.”—*EWING*.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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HER OWN FAULT.

CHAPTER I.

ON a bleak afternoon, about a fortnight afterwards, the wind was howling over the jagged cliffs, sweeping the moorland ridge of Cefyn Bryn in the distance; and driving the withered dishonoured leaves, that had been clinging to the rough unfriendly boughs, in eddies from the adjacent woods. Its angry gusts penetrated with jeering violence into the lonely churchyard, which was almost overhanging the shore, within sound of the "sounding sea."

The sky was overcast, and the far-off horizon line was blurred with mist. Showers of rain fell at intervals, hiding the dull leaden colour of the sea, the yellowish brown of the sands, and the long headland which was changing from purple

to grey. Every now and then these showers ceased, revealing the tors broken in their outlines, the ponderous boulders protruding from the waters, and the white, curling, crested waves which were leaping playfully up to the rocks, and leaving them bare as they receded to the suction of the tide.

A slight figure, clad in black, sat by a new stone in the churchyard. Very cold and grey was the appearance of the stone, in spite of some wet fern leaves and a few autumnal flowers which had been strewn upon it. The pitiless wind had whirled the leaves away, and they lay on the grass at the woman's feet. Very calm and deathly white, was her small pale face, as she sat listening to the monotonous dirge of the wind, the splash and murmur of the waters; looking down, as in a dream, at the swathes of shadow which were now beginning to appear on the sea, varied with gleams of tremulous light, which had a spectral look in them, at the crystal wall of the breaking waves, and the glistening margin like a mirror which was left on

the beach of brown sand where the tide was going down. She was thinking of the unfathomable depths which were beyond, of the vast heaving bosom of the everchanging ocean, and of her own utter loneliness in life, and the thrill came over her which is caused by infinity.

"Changing, changing," she thought, "and none of us are missed. Sucked in one after the other like those restless waves, whose little lives are over when they beat themselves to death. I only can mourn for her, and who is left to mourn for *me*."

Charley was made of sterner stuff than the little heart which had so readily broken, the little body which had been so easily destroyed by its grief, which lay buried on that spot. She could sit quietly bearing the pain of loneliness, which felt as if it must endure for ever. But not the less was she tormented with assailing questions.

"Had it been so," she asked, "with the myriads and myriads of souls which had passed away from this earth? It was overwhelming to think

of the innumerable multitude who must have suffered as acutely as she did ! Was human love granted only to intensify human anguish ? Could the will of God in the creation of the world be thus thwarted ?" Everything seemed involved in a dark veil of mystery, which obscured if it did not entirely prevent the light.

She shuddered as she thought of the great desert of years, bare and cold, which lay before her.

There was an utterness of desolation about the poor solitary girl—who possessed more acquaintance with the burial turf than she did with those above it—which seemed to match the wild solitude of the place.

So thought the man who stood watching her with folded arms in yearning pity, taking in all the details of the face which was so full of suppressed anguish, that he forgot his own sorrows in one glimpse at its blank misery.

Away amongst the lakes and mountains, or in crowded continental towns, he had never been able to forget the despairing expression of the

poor girl's face, as he had seen it in some of his last interviews with her, or the miserable loneliness of her life.

That despairing expression seemed to have gained upon her. Charley was changed indeed. Her eyes had been always pensive, and her lips always sensitive. But the former were now sunken into caverns, and the latter were drawn down at their corners. Her physical beauty had decreased, but the spiritual beauty which had always been hers, was enhanced by this apparent change for the worse. The intensity of character which is only to be won by sore experience, shone out from her face. And yet she was evidently of too fine and delicate a fibre to be able to win a living for herself in the world.

Under any other circumstances the looker-on would have been fully aware of the subtle touches of poetry in the scene before him. The muddy red earth of the pathway was marked with the prints of the girl's wandering feet. The violence of the wind had disordered her dress, and the

glory of her hair, unfastened from its usual confinement, was streaming to her waist. He could see her wet eyelashes beneath the purple-lidded eyes, and one arm in its helpless abandonment lying on the cold stone. Under her feet were the hardy ferns fluttering about on the dank grass, as if in merry unconsciousness of her agonized sorrow; whilst the remorseless sea was moaning beneath, with no sound even from a sea-bird to break the awful loneliness.

"Would to God I could comfort her!" he thought to himself. "But she looks so far apart from me in her spiritual elevation. And perhaps the sanctity of such grief ought not to be disturbed."

She changed her position, and he ventured to approach her.

She seemed to feel the approach of some one though she did not look round. The fluttering which quickened her pulse was obvious.

"Charley!"

How she started! The blood rushed into

her white face—the hands were stretched out—the delicate lips were a-quiver.

“Bryan—Mr. Maxwell—oh—why did you come?”

“Walk about with me,” he answered quietly. “You ought not to sit there any longer. You have sat there much too long already.”

And then, turning to her very gently, he asked, “How are you?”

She shrank—putting down her hands, and wringing them with a pitiful gesture which went to his heart,—her eyes on the grey stone. He took her hand—drew it through his arm with gentle force—and made her take two or three turns up and down the walk.

“Charley,” he said, “this will not do; you must not expose yourself to these winds—and clad as you are. It is not right, Charley.”

There was a little silence, and he continued.

“Let us speak of it. It will be better for you to speak of it. Your sister is *at rest*. You would not have her go through the sad probation all again. You would not call her back.

Her gentle childlike spirit could not have struggled with the world. Dorothy might have suffered without improvement. She could not encounter the evil. She was one of those who do not seem to require that continual discipline, involved in a longer life, which is reserved for the training of stronger natures. Charley, do not let it kill you. After all, we may have most need to pity the man who would surely have drawn back if he could have forseen the ruin which he has wrought."

He forced himself to say all this in the gentlest of tones—feeling that it was necessary to break through the silence which she had imposed upon herself. If he could make her weep, even that might be good. There was another momentary spasm—a sudden dilating of her eyes. Her lips trembled, and her hands were tightly clenched together.

"God may forgive him," she said; "I do not feel as if I ever can She loved him to the end; but she ought to have hated him; she ought to have flung him from her with scorn—

to have told him to his face that he was a base, mercenary villain! Mr. Maxwell, there are poor ignorant creatures who have never been taught to distinguish good from evil, punished with death for a crime less than this! Oh! why did you speak of it?—it makes me mad!”

Then she burst into the tears he had wished to see, and the sound went sobbing away amongst the trees. He did not answer her; he had scarcely been aware before of the passion which smouldered beneath the quiet exterior. He waited and looked at her with a patient, pitiful smile, holding her little hand in his, as if he would give her courage to endure, and strengthen her in a fatherly way.

He knew that she had been strong to conquer, by the simple power of her self-sacrificing devotion, and that the conqueror's power would come to her again. He waited almost expectant of the words which followed.

“I know I am wrong. I know who it was that said ‘Vengeance is mine.’ But oh, Mr. Maxwell, my sister's death *was* as much caused

by the cruelty and injustice of your brother as if he had murdered her intentionally."

"I know it—I know it," answered Bryan in a husky voice, which had a strange sound in it. He waited, and tried to make it clear, but was forced to proceed. "These are grievous thoughts for you to allow your mind to dwell upon. Mental suffering is hard enough to bear, I know; there is no sickness like the sickness of the spirit." He waited again. He did not say "*I have fought the spectre in its worst form, and I have not yielded.*"¹ But he continued after a minute, "You are young; your life is all before you. There is a happiness which is higher than pleasure."

He tried to speak without despondency. There was an impressive dignity in his manner, but he did not deceive Charley.

For the first time she looked at him, and noticed that his cheeks were hollow and sunburnt, and that his broad thoughtful brow was marked with lines of care, whilst the fair moustache and the hair parted in the middle—after the fashion

of the old Anglo-Saxon portraits—were already streaked with white. There were tender melancholy lights in the expressive grey eyes, which made her think of what he had endured.

“I can’t thank you,” she said quietly, “for coming, I don’t know how many miles, to be kind to me. It is like you. But what was the use of it? It is all over now.”

He pressed her hand and looked his answer.

“Are you sorry for me? is any one sorry?” she said listlessly; and yet, though she scarcely knew it herself, this sorrow and sympathy from another seemed to lighten her burden a little.

“Dorothy is safe,” he answered. “I have come to remind you that you have another work before you now.”

“No, no,” she said, drawing her arm away suddenly from his, and setting her lips with the old resolute look. “Mr. Maxwell, you cannot talk of that; do you forget?”

“Our compact? No, I remember it perfectly. I was to wait six months, and see if I was of the same mind at the end of that time. Well, the

six months are nearly over, and I want you, Charley."

She looked at him in perplexity—in bewildered incredulity. She did not yet believe he could be in earnest, though she felt that he spoke with respectful tenderness. She had a sort of terror of giving away to her own inclinations in the matter. It was his happiness alone which she ought to seek.

"No, no," she said, despondingly, "it is only your goodness—no, it must not, shall not be; there are reasons against it."

He was a little confounded, a little disappointed. The sad passivity about her, which had been almost irritating, was gone. She had roused into life, she had hinted at more than lay on the surface. Was it possible that sorrow could have sharpened her faculties of observation, and gifted her with a power of analysis and moral divination? Had it given her a grasp more comprehensive and entire? Could it be possible that she had discovered his secret? He shrank from the thought. Yet what, after all,

was this secret, but one to be shared with his future wife? The more he thought of it, the more he was convinced that his ill-fated love had passed away. The shock had been violent and cruel, like the tearing away of a limb, but nothing but the wound was left. And why should that wound be for ever a torment to him? He had flattered himself that the sharpness of the remembrance, which still cut like a hidden knife, causing inward bleeding, was no more to be seen than those instruments of torture which are discovered blood-stained after the death of the ascetic. It was a reproach to his manhood that the torture should be there. He winced, and put his hand to his side.

She looked into his face with eyes that had grown steadfast, scanning the change of every feature, and noticing for the first time the whiteness of his lips. Then she suddenly changed in look, voice, and manner.

“Bryan, oh! Bryan! are you ill?”

“Not at all, only I want you to take care of me, Charley. Will you?”

She shrank again, clasped her fingers tightly, and lowering her eyes, that he might not see the fluttering look of apprehension, the instinctive yearning in them, said,

“Tell me the truth, you are ill—you have been ill? I will be your nurse, your friend, your companion. I will help you like a servant. . . . Oh! I forgot, it would be wrong!”

“Not at all, if you will be one thing more—my wife. Charley,” he said, taking the unwilling hands, “is it so hard?”

Charley shrank no longer. She lifted her eyes and faced him steadily.

“You know that it would not be hard to *me*. It seems to me that it would be false pride if I dared not to tell you—what you know already—that I love you; but not for that reason,” she said, drawing up her slight frail figure, “will I marry you. Do you think I will let you make yourself for ever miserable, out of charity?”

“Charley!”

“Do you think,” she went on, unheeding, “that

I mistake your pity for love? Do you think I do not know all the story of the past, and the depth of the generosity that would help you to hide your motives from me? No, Bryan," she continued, with a sudden abandonment to her involuntary half-scorn, and a smile of selfless tenderness, "you know what they said, that there was a stain upon her name—on hers—on *hers*—that no one would speak to her—and that I—I acted imprudently in trying to save her. You are pitiful to me for this, but you mistake if you think I mind it for myself. It will be forgotten if I remain as I am, but if I become your wife people may give their own explanation of our marriage. No, I cannot take your charity."

He answered nothing for awhile, walking in silence by her side; and she, wrapt in the solitariness of her own suffering, scarcely noticed him until they neared the grave once more. Then she looked up. So pale and worn, so thinned with long endurance, was the face next hers—the face of the man she loved—that the

weary look in it struck her with a sudden stab.

“Bryan!”

“So, Charley,” he said, with a tired sigh, “you will let me go back to my work again as I came, alone. Well, let it be so, the end may not be very far off. But, dear, I am not so proud as you. And yet, if you cannot confide your all to me, and trust me to keep your honour unimpaired—if you don’t know that the reports which you mention are less than nothing to me, you cannot love me much, I think.” There was another pause, and he went on. “You are a pure, good, faithful creature; the man will be happy who can call you wife, and yet you let a mere fancy keep us asunder. Our love may not be perfect, dear—few things, it seems to me lately, are perfect in this world. There may be old memories to come between us, old scars which cannot be easily healed. But, Charley, these things make my need for you all the greater; if you drive me from you, promise to say a prayer for me now and then.

The evening was drawing in. He moved to go. But the soft trembling fingers wandered from the stone on Dorothy's grave, to the hand that was ready to have and to hold them till death. She had no longer the persistency to keep to her resolution, no longer the strength to put him away from her, but allowed him to take these fingers in his, and suffered him to enfold her in his arms.

The wind, which was shifting and veering to the east, had swept the clouds away. The sun's disc, like a ball of fire, was just above the verge of the ocean. The tender purple of the hills was burnished with its rich rays; and the sea, of the colour of half-cool iron, was just rippled with a few quiet waves, when, by that grave, Bryan bared his head, and thanked God for the gift of a true woman's love.

CHAPTER II.

THEY walked back as if in a dream—one of those dreams, which, like foretastes of future bliss, transfigure everything for us occasionally in this life of ours. The ruby glow had disappeared, fading before it vanished into a clear topaz light above the horizon, but there was still a faint reflection of it in the western sky. And already the evening mist, which, by a mysterious law of amalgamation, makes appearances seem like realities even in the natural world, was enveloping the sea and hanging in films over the hills, as Bryan wrapped Charley's cloak more closely around her, and led her back to Martha's cottage.

It seemed to Charley as if some unseen agency had torn asunder the barriers which divided them

from the spirit-land, and as if Dorothy were present with her, telling her to grieve no more.

The dismal thoughts of mortality and decay which had haunted her imagination but a few hours before, and which seemed to have been heightened by the sight of the sodden earth, and the presence of the falling leaves, had altogether passed away. She had no more thought of death as a curse, only the sense of a great calm. For the first time she was beginning to understand how death itself might be permitted to enlarge the horizon of life, and was seeing beyond its "mystic margin," with newer and more extended powers of vision. The girl was no foolish sentimentalist, inclined to rush from one extreme of feeling into another. But this consciousness reconciled her to a fact from which otherwise she might have shrunk with a species of shame—the fact that a strange new beatitude had been coming upon her even in the midst of her sorrow, so that the horrors of the last few months seemed to be blotted out.

Could she think without gratitude of the

heart-struggles which were over; could she remember that she had no longer to go out into the world to earn a scanty pittance amongst unappreciative people, without a thrill of relief, that she had found a shelter to protect her from the misery which had threatened her? It was almost as impossible for the woman to help being glad, as it must have been for the dove when it returned to the ark after all that weary wandering over the drear expanse of waters.

It had been a long, long night; the darkness had been overpowering. But fresh sunshine was suddenly flooding her soul. God's benison was encircling her. His peace seemed to be coming back to her, like rain into the thirsty ground. She seemed to hear it whispering to her in the "ripples of the air." She was electrified with fresh vitality, alive again with the strange new life of love. She felt faint and weary with the sense of this reaction. She moved her lips, but it was impossible to speak. Indeed neither she nor Bryan could have re-

peated afterwards what they said to each other in that memorable walk. He too had a vague feeling that he must have been dreaming, and that everything would vanish and leave him as he was before. He too had an undefined sense of being relieved of an intense weight, beneath which he had been staggering; for his bravery in bearing his cross had not made it any lighter.

At the cottage door Martha met them with a bewildered expression, which was almost whimsical on her usually prim features. Her "old man," who, in a sailor's hat and a suit of corduroy, was smoking his pipe in the adjacent kitchen, was snapped up for his want of tact, when he hobbled to the door and asked curious questions, in a strange unmellifluous accent of the broadest Welsh, which fortunately neither Bryan nor Charley could comprehend.

Martha hustled him into a corner, as though he had been a useless bale of goods, while she prepared her best apartment, that the "strange gentleman" might have tea. To the artist's

eye, the kitchen—with its sanded floor, its old kettle singing on the fire, the flitch of bacon and dried ham hanging from the ceiling, the rough clean cloth spread on the table, and the pet pieces of china and glass ranged on the dresser,—was in itself sufficiently picturesque. But old Martha would not be satisfied without getting out her home-made cakes and best fresh butter.

A little while before Bryan had thought that the small pleasures of this life would be for ever indifferent to him. But life began to have fresh attractions when Mrs. Griffiths had kindled a blaze in the room, which was furnished with comical old-world relics, and smelt of rose leaves and dried lavender. Life won a glow from the warm fireside with Charley, visible by its light, with an unearthly lustre in her dark eyes, like a saint with a halo round her.

He had tales to tell of his summer rambles. He had not been to beaten routes, but to breezy mountains and lovely untrodden valleys, to invigorate his weakened frame by a full delicious draught of

the nectar of pure air, and to rest his soul by a sight of the glorious works of the Almighty. He had travelled in an easy Odyssean manner, making sketches of the scenery, and studying by the way those collateral sciences, which he considered to be intimately connected with his art. He delighted like Kepler in attempting to think "God's thoughts after Him."

"And now," he said to Charley, "we must go back to work. I say 'we,' for I can't work without you. I can take a lodging at the hotel, which is only about a mile away from here. I am determined not to go to London alone. Wife, will you be afraid of the life?"

To be married at the same church where that funeral service had been read, so short a time ago. How impossible it all seemed to her. She was a little disconcerted to find he expected that the marriage should take place so soon. She wished to persuade him that there should be a necessary delay; and yet, at the same time, the recollection flashed upon her that she had no home to go to in the interval.

There was no affectation, no artificial prudery about Charley. She looked down at her deep black dress, and then at Bryan's face, so pale and sorrowful-looking, in spite of its sunburnt hue, and thanked God for the sense of protection which she had in this man's presence; at the same time consenting that the ceremony, which it seemed so strange to think of, should take place as soon as the necessary formalities could be complied with. She knew that she must of necessity have done this; for where could she go—who would protect her if she insisted upon waiting?

And perhaps there was another reason in her heart of hearts. She felt anxious about Bryan, so anxious that she persuaded him to rest in the big chair, which Mrs. Griffiths had wheeled forward especially for her use. And when that good woman peeped in, as she did every now and then, on pretence of playing propriety, she was astonished to see "Miss Charley's young man," who ought to have been otherwise occupied, leaning back with closed eyes in his tempo-

rary exhaustion. And when Martha crept away to make dissatisfied comments on the subject, "Miss Charley," so far from resenting the insult, sat looking wistfully at him. He was almost asleep, and the gloomy expression which had become habitual to his features during the last few months—the sad look which he could control by an effort of will when he was awake—was creeping back again with its indelible stamp.

Charley was a proud woman, or thought herself to be one. But a proud woman may do strange and unexpected things. She rose on tiptoe, and passed her arms about his neck. He did not look up. She thought he was sleeping, and, unasked, she pressed two kisses on his forehead, the last longer and more steady than the first. She did it quietly and placidly, no flush was on her cheek.

Bryan smiled, between sleeping and waking. He did not clearly know what had taken place. But the shadow passed away from his face, and he gave a little half-unconscious sigh, the sigh

of a child that had been comforted in its mother's arms. The fever which had been like madness was over for ever; but something purer and better, the calm tide of a never-ending love, was welling up in his heart. A tide which, deep and unabated in its fulness, should flow on with ever-widening sweep, though the ebbing of passion had left the sands of life apparently arid, unprofitable, and forsaken.

CHAPTER III.

WHILE these things had been passing in Wales, life of a very different sort had been going on elsewhere. Amongst the crowd of tourists who flocked like a swarm of bees to the Continent, "doing" everything according to the current slang of the day, an invalid lady and her niece had attracted much notice, who had travelled from one foreign watering-place after another, "trying the waters," as another phrase is. Spa, Wiesbaden, Ems, and other less hackneyed places, had been tried by them in turn, apparently to no purpose. And now, wearier than ever of coming across the people who were going in regular routine beat, such as the couriers or the guide-books invariably marked out, and who never diverged to untrodden

spots which Murray did not mention, they were coming back to Baden, intending to rest there for a time, and to go from thence by easy stages to Brussels.

They had left London in the beginning of July. Miss Armitage had been pronounced to be "decidedly better." But the doctors who were weary of her continual relapses, and who argued badly of her case from certain constitutional tendencies, which were now for the first time beginning to manifest themselves, suggested a journey to the Continent as the best hope of recruiting her strength.

Sara caught eagerly at the idea.

"Change of air and fresh society," she said, "would set Aunt Jenny up."

It did not suit her purpose to admit that she herself had a secret hankering after some such change. Not only was she sick of London, of its variety of amusements, and its constant round of morning and evening engagements, but she longed to burst other barriers, and get away from her acquaintances more entirely than

she could do if she were obliged to remain in England. The desire to breathe a different atmosphere, and to see fresh scenes, came upon her like a strange unsated thirst.

A thirst which very soon was gratified. So much so, that even Miss Trevanion's maid wondered at her mistress's indifference to the beauties of natural scenery. Sometimes Sara did not exert herself even to look out of the railway carriage windows. For the days were often hot, and she would complain of being tired, and sleep all the way. Her spirit was not in tune for studying the grandeur of nature.

"I hate the penance of sight-seeing," she explained to Miss Armitage. "I pity the British tourist who is condemned to plod through the treadmill of his daily work. I never can enjoy myself if I *have* to enjoy. The world would be 'very tolerable,' you know, *but* for its pleasures."

Little noticeable change had taken place in Sara during the last few months. Yet Lawrence Routh, who joined the party at Spa in August, could discern a change in her, which was not

manifest to those who were constantly with her. Her eyes were not only dark; they had become piercing in their intensity. Her colour was more hectic, and her cheeks were thinner. Her figure was still aristocratic, but it had lost its ease of movement. She smiled almost constantly, showing her teeth like specimens of polished ivory in the stereotyped smile. Yet her depression was sometimes so evident that she made no attempt to hide it, whilst at other times she would indulge in the strangest freaks.

"She's becoming a fast woman," he thought, and steeled himself to bear it. "There's something hard even about her beauty. It lacks the element of feminine softness."

He watched her again, and tried to define the change. Her head was as beautifully poised on her shoulders, her neck and chin were as faultless in chiselling as before; yet many a man might be excused for feeling, as he looked at her, that this was not the woman he could choose to be the companion of his life. Sara had gained in some respects, but she had surely

lost in others. Lawrence Routh preferred the diamond comparatively unpolished as it had been, to this new set stone, which was catching the light in all its sharp-cut facets.

He did not "get on" as he had once done with his ward. The irritating feeling of being watched was intolerable to her. The change in Sara made him querulous, and, after a short time, he went home again to his work, weary and out of sorts.

"*You* must look after her now," he forced himself to write to Rosswith Maxwell, whom he avoided in company without seeming to avoid him, "*I* have taken the charge of her all these years, and now the task will devolve upon you. One sentence comprises it all, she is 'getting talked about;' and however a man may covet such notoriety, nothing more unfortunate can happen to a woman."

After this letter had been received, Sara was called upon more often to play the rôle of bride-elect to the dark, handsome "Englisher," who occasionally dogged her footsteps, covertly

sometimes, for Sara would permit no sort of espionage. She would only see Rosswith when it suited her humour. And her humour with him was to be cold, *distracte*, and self-absorbed, with a hidden inward raging of which she was conscious. Otherwise she was still the brilliant heiress, courting every possible excitement to stimulate her wearied feelings; yet cherishing secret repulsions and dislikes, which were hidden under the smile of a saddened heart. "She doesn't look happy," people said behind her back. "Take my word for it, she will soon go off."

Some of them were glad to make the prophecy, for Sara was the cynosure of all eyes. The whole place was ringing with her praises. Her dress and appearance were described as the "only things worth looking at." Her patterns were borrowed; the style of her hair was imitated. Her hats, her bonnets, or the horses which she rode, were the subjects of constant remark. There were jealous English visitors who somewhat vulgarly declared that Miss Trevanion

just happened to be "the rage" for a time ; and there were women who raised their eyebrows, and said "they didn't see why she should be so spoilt or run after—there was nothing at all wonderful about her." Yet these very women were pleased to be told that their daughters resembled the popular heiress, and they themselves so far yielded to the weaknesses of others as to deign to look after her, and criticize every fold in her dress.

Envy took an ugly form with some of them ; they hinted things that were not true ; and Sara, whose coquetry had become harder, brighter, less harmless than before, was vain-glorious enough to enjoy her perilous pre-eminence. The breath of incense was always grateful to her. She could pay back every impertinence with interest, whilst she yielded to a natural impulse to entertain and enliven. "It's perfectly true ; it's a mere chance," she said carelessly, "whether one hits the taste, and chances to be in the fashion or not. I'm very sorry if I nip anybody's prospects in the bud. I suppose

these stout English mothers get tired of hawking about their wares, and the virgins themselves are sour with keeping. I'm very sorry for them, but it isn't my fault."

But, if she was no favourite with her own sex, she was always popular amongst men, who could not cherish any rancour where Sara was concerned. She was equally admired by the Belgique "magnificents," the Prussian attachés, and the Austrian officers, who, she said, "danced like nobody else in the world." The "Trevanion," as they had familiarly begun to call her (Rosswith was stung into fury when he first heard the name), was said to "make the running" wherever she went. At Spa, and at Ems, as well as at Baden, she had come in contact with bold-eyed "Russes," piquante "Françaises," and fair-haired Marguerites; but she was always said to have "points" enough to make the betting heavy upon her. She had offers by the dozen, in spite of her engagement, from impossible-to-be-pronounced-named gentlemen, whose pedigrees, by their own showing, were consider-

ably longer than their purses. But it soon began to be mooted about that, though she was frank and pleasant up to a certain point, beyond that point nobody could make an impression on her. This report did not satisfy Rosswith, who, when Sara appeared in the drive in a basket-carriage, with a wolf-skin for a rug, and the prettiest pair of ponies which could be boasted in the place, ventured to offer a hesitating rebuke.

"Why," he asked, "would she do such very noticeable things?" (he did not like to hint at her unnecessary extravagance). But he argued that there was a sort of presumption in dressing differently from other people, and that nothing which was exceptional could be forgiven to women.

"Don't you know," she said indifferently, "that I long ago refused to be compressed into any ancient moulds, to please you or other people. I live my life after my own fashion. I told you it would be so."

"It is for your sake I speak," he said with an attempt at tenderness; "you must not make

yourself too cheap. I value you too much."

"I shall always be cheap," she answered, giving utterance to some of the bitterness and defiance which were eating out her heart. "The remedy is in your own hands. I have wondered at your slowness in pointing out my shortcomings. But you can't say I wish to deceive you. I tell you plainly, that not any of the men who chatter with me, and joke with me, really respect me. They value me as I valued myself when I accepted *you*—a man whose mind is devoid of all great and noble thoughts—as my future husband, when I bound myself to your level. We can't do anything reasonable,—we can't expect to read, or think together; you know as well as I do that society must be our only resource. You must amuse yourself in *your* way, and I must take mine."

The languid matter-of-fact way in which she uttered this speech positively made him start and shiver. For the moment he almost longed to be free of this woman. He had long ago begun to fret at the fact that she should be so "in-

fernally clever," and to "wish to heaven that she did not crush him so by her superiority." It was perfectly true that he had not cared lately to be much in her society—true, that there were no subjects of conversation between them.

Sara had lost her opportunity of reforming Rosswith Maxwell, and was perfectly aware that she had lost it.

When he knew her first, her influence had acted upon him as a sort of moral showerbath. There were possibilities of good in him, which she might have brought to light. The inevitable spell, which a powerful nature exerts over a feeble one, was acting on him for the better. But her conduct had soon embittered him, and thrown him back on himself. She had shown no disposition to comply with any of his wishes—no interest in his career—no desire for his welfare. And the slough of evil which he could not cast off unaided any more than the leopard could change its spots, was enveloping him more deeply and fatally than ever. There were times when he was agonized at the thought of the

wreck which he had made of the whole of his past life ; but this agony made him plunge more deeply into the vortex of dissipation, in the vain hope of drowning useless regret. The more spiritual part of his degraded nature seemed only to have been aroused that he might stifle its upbraidings. He tried to comfort himself with fatalism ; he tried to be *insouciant* ; but he was gnawing his own heart out with envy and discontent.

He looked at Sara as she spoke. There was nothing apparently repelling in the quiet variations of her pleasing voice, no consciousness in her unchanging face of having aimed a Parthian shaft. It was a face so handsome, yet so unlovely—like one of the coloured statues of some ancient goddess—untouched by any human feeling.

“Deep in her hidden heart” the remembrance of the past existence of some emotion “might fester,” but there was no outward sign of anything so commonplace.

Rosswith’s lips were compressed, his brows

were contracted ; there was a good deal of the tiger in him yet, but he knew perfectly well that it would be useless for him to attempt to vent his rage upon Sara, even if he could venture upon such imprudence. He might as well beat himself to death against an unmovable rock.

Yet he was painfully conscious of the bitter, impotent, surging, passionate indignation, which dared only betray itself by the clenched hands and the blanched face. His breath came quick and fast as he panted out the words,

“ You are hard and cruel to me ; whatever my errors may have been in the past, you might give a fellow a chance for the present.”

If she was touched by his words, she was not thrown off her guard.

Beyond a certain point she could not dissemble. She was beginning to find Rosswith out. She knew that he had deliberately deceived her about his prospects and his pursuits, but that he could be critical over wines, cigars, dishes, and toilette, and that he was already in a state of undeclared bankruptcy. The discovery did not

make her heart drop away from him, for it had never been his. It only gave her a feeling of secret repulsion which she was too transparent to hide.

He made one more attempt.

"We don't often take the air together, so I don't ask you to let me share your drives," he said a little drily; "but I suppose I may meet you at the soirée to-night? Mrs. Newton told me you were going with her. May I ask, for the sake of appearances, that you will give me the first waltz?"

"Impossible; I have promised it," she said, turning from him. "*Après*, if you are very good."

CHAPTER IV.

THEY parted. A sickly change came over Rosswith's face. He was getting to the bitter core of the tempting fruit through the deceptive bloom and pulp. He had obstinately struggled against the conviction that there was no further hope of happiness left for him in life. But that conviction came upon him with appalling violence, nevertheless.

Long ago he had discovered that their approaching marriage was about the last thing in the world of which Sara cared to talk. It had galled him to find that though she encouraged other men, yet, owing to Miss Armitage's presence, he could seldom or ever see her, or talk with her as he desired. But were they not better without such talks? He had tried to struggle with

his propensities, holding his own failings up to miserable and unavailing contemplation. Here in the very hot-bed of temptation, he had avoided the gaming-tables—knowing the iron chain of his former habit, and feeling unable to face it and break away from it. All such fears of danger fled away from him when he listened to Sara's words. He had no more thought of meeting her at the ball, but left her in a burst of frantic rage. A rage which he had carefully hidden in her presence—restraining the pent-up torrent of fiery words; but which had taken possession of him like a fever, and sent him on his way panting and staggering, his heart pulsing frantically with the excess of his passion.

“Many men have made themselves fools over that woman,” he thought. “It is our fashion to make signal asses of ourselves, I suppose. I have heard her compared to a Madame Recamier, who could sway a generation. She is more like a mischievous Helen with her fatal fascinations.” He began to fancy that he hated her

and her beauty, that "no one could be deep enough to fathom her tricks." "She is a serpent when she chooses to be," he said. "I will make no more efforts to please her, or submit to her tyranny."

And while Sara was dancing, surrounded by admirers, taking care not to damage her complexion by over-fast waltzing, Rosswith was taking his supper under such circumstances as involved self-oblivion for the night, and violent headache for the next day.

It was well she could not see him on the following morning, with eyes bloodshot and hair disordered—swaying to and fro—a horrible sight in the broad daylight.

But she was reclining on the sofa, spending her mornings, as she generally did, in Aunt Jenny's room. The waiter had just removed the coffee, and brought her a letter on a tray.

"A card for another *soirée dansante*. I am getting bored with these insane entertainments," said Sara, irritably tossing it away.

"You said you were tired of them a year ago,

and yet you frequent them as much as ever," timidly interposed Miss Armitage, who was never able to understand the restless changes in her niece. "If the society in which you mix is really as frivolous and heartless as you so constantly describe it to be, would it not be as well, dear, to make a brave effort and break away from what you dislike? That is," she added hesitatingly, "if you really dislike it. I hardly know, Sallie dear, what you do think about things—you are so inconsistent."

"There is no such thing as inconsistency," answered Sara dreamily. "As if it did not follow as a matter of course that we *must* be inconsistent with our former selves. Can you remember anybody who has not changed in the course of years? I do not know whether the word change expresses it. Rather what is ingrained in the character comes out, just as an apparently blank piece of paper when held to the fire reveals secret writing. I suppose the whole of our future history is as much involv-

ed in what we are in ourselves, as the oak-tree is hidden in the acorn."

Miss Armitage did not answer. She had a terror of everything which verged on metaphysics.

Sara continued. "Sometimes I feel as if I have a dozen selves, and even at my best I am always two people." It occurred to Aunt Jenny that the Apostle Paul had said something of the sort in a very different strain, but she did not venture to allude to the words; for latterly her niece had resented all allusion to religion. Yet it seemed to her that there was something more amiss than usual, if anything *could* be more amiss than the tendency which Sara had shown lately to break away from all control.

"There's a desperation about her," thought the old lady with an aching heart, "which I don't at all like."

She was ready to make full allowance for the girl, but prayed in her secret heart that something would happen, even at the eleventh hour, to avert this marriage.

"Sallie," she said presently, "will you take a drive with me to-day ? It is better than always frequenting the promenade; you make your face too cheap."

The very expression Ross had used ! It stabbed Sara like a hidden knife. She rose with one of her quick impulses, and averted her eyes from the invalid, pretending to look out of the window.

"It is very hot and dusty for so late in September," she said. "I suppose it is cooler in England. I get so tired of this continual glare."

"Would you like to go back, dear ? Don't think of staying for *my* sake," interposed Miss Armitage, quickly.

"No, I was selfish to say a word about it. We will wait for the eight weeks which we thought of at first. I daresay it's as well here as it would be anywhere else. And you know the doctors said yesterday that they thought you were really better."

"I should have much more chance of getting

well if I could see her looking happy," thought Miss Armitage with a plaintive smile. She did not make the remark aloud.

The carriage was engaged at once, and Aunt Jenny, who was accustomed to enjoy her drives, leaning back propped up with pillows, was enraptured with the beauty of the day. She shot disappointed glances at Sara, who, with eyes unreceptive of the glories of the prospect, was muttering complaints about the heat.

The silvery waters of the Morg glittering in the distance, and the picturesque ranges of the Black Forest, were apparently wasted upon her. She remembered nothing but her own degradation.

"The warmth is very life to me," murmured Aunt Jenny in her satisfaction.

"Yes," said Sara, with one of her forced attempts at merriment, "you bask in it, just as if you were a pussy-cat, or, to use a prettier metaphor, a hot-house plant; but *I* am anything but a salamander."

The road wound on through a part of the

forest where they were shaded from the rays of the sun ; and Sara, whose inattention had resulted, not from any natural stupidity, but simply because more important subjects were occupying her mind, roused herself and looked around her. It was like a grand cathedral of Nature. Drops of dew were still glittering on flowers and blades of grass, which were intermingled with tall brown fern. The purified atmosphere, less gross and obstructive than the climate of England, seemed to intensify every object, giving it definite form and outline, as if the eye had been aided by a natural stereoscope.

The fir branches which were nearest to them seemed to be almost black in colour, cut out against the blue of the sky. The solemn dark green of the distant pines blended into a dusky hue. And yet, when each individual tree was analysed, instead of considering the intermingled sweep, each had its distinct individuality and tint,—blue where the colour was most intense; ensanguined where the sun was lighting up the red-barked branches, and tender emerald where

mosses were adorning the trunks. The sight unconsciously transported her to a past phase of existence, in which she had dreamt of such a life as might befit immortals.

“Oh, if Bryan were here, wouldn’t he be charmed with this?” she thought, suddenly forgetting that he, whose friendship for her had been cemented by thinking the same thoughts, liking the same books, and being enthusiastic over the same scenes, was parted from her for ever.

She remembered it in another instant, with a bitter sense of her own shame. Could she be engaged to one man, and yet thinking in that way still of another? She trembled at the sight of the abyss into which she was falling. All was silent for some moments, with only the drone of insects and the trill of happy birds to interrupt Sara’s thoughts. She leant back in the shade, to be safe from the observant eyes which she knew to be fixed upon her, and shed a few burning tears beneath the shelter of her veil.

She had nothing yet of the *æqua mens* which philosophy alone could give her.

"You are very quiet, darling," said Aunt Jenny presently; "is it possible that you, with your keen sense of beauty, would really prefer London or a crowded promenade to such a drive as this?"

"It is beautiful," said Sara excitedly, "but it doesn't satisfy me. Even in the highest style of scenery, as in the most beautiful music or painting, I have always a sort of feeling that there must be something more to come—a craving after something better—a sense of disappointment. And then sometimes it frightens me. It reminds me of Fonqué's stories. I wouldn't go through this wood alone if you could pay me my weight in gold."

Miss Armitage had never heard of Sintram. She looked puzzled, as her niece continued.:

"I feel it most in mountain scenery. I dare say you have never had the sensation of which I have been conscious once or twice in my life—as if you were overwhelmed with the problem of immensity—had a sense of being lost in it—

as if—I can't describe exactly how—all around you were a void, and existence a nothingness. Perhaps that is how a disembodied spirit must feel—forced to travel through space—alone.”

And she shivered, in spite of the heat.

“Child, you forget it is not alone. Don't look at me like that. I know—I can't help saying it—you must be terribly unhappy, or you would not have such thoughts as these.”

Sara felt that she had drifted from her usual self-command. What could she expect her aunt to know of these insoluble questions; or how could she hope to make her understand the one conscious and bitter feeling that no language could adequately express? She had revealed a little of her secret heart, and was ready to despise herself accordingly.

“Unhappy!” she repeated, trying to be cynical; “I thought good people were taught not to seek for happiness here.”

“Peace is better than happiness,” said her aunt gently. “He left us His peace.”

Sara burst into sudden tears. The poor pas-

sionate nature was so entirely overstrung, that it was breaking through the ligatures which had hitherto restrained it. She was yearning for affection, but she would not show it. She twitched her hand impatiently from Miss Armitage's grasp, and wept quietly, with an abandonment of which she had never before been capable.

It was something so new, that Aunt Jenny became alarmed.

"You will make yourself ill," she said. "Dear Sara, be calm, and let us talk a little." She hesitated for a moment, being doubtful how to gain courage to tell her niece that no suffering of hers could possibly atone for the line of conduct which she feared she was marking out for herself; that she would be wounding her own spirit, and rendering her whole life a degrading mockery, if things were as she suspected.

"If you are not happy in your future prospects," she faltered, "let me write to your guardian. It is not too late to stop the marriage. It always seemed to me most unlikely

that you should love such a man as Rosswith Maxwell."

Sara's unusual tears had ceased. She sat upright, and answered petulantly—

"What is unlikely, or what is not? Just what you didn't expect always comes to pass, I think; although I believe the observation is not original with me. As to 'love,' as you call it, Auntie dear, one has ceased to believe in the unadulterated thing. There must be a venture in everything, you know, and I run the same chance, I suppose, as other people, of making a successful experiment in life."

"I would rather see you cry than hear you talk like this," said Aunt Jenny very slowly. "It is terrible to hear you jest about such things."

"I don't jest," she answered sharply. "If you wish to know the truth, I have not sacrificed my honesty in making any romantic declarations. You may be sure he will exact no such tribute from me; he values my money a great deal too much. And, supposing it was a mistake, I must bear the consequences of it—

you know I can't unmake it—you wouldn't have me jilt him."

It was Miss Armitage's last opportunity: she tried to summon all her strength, but a sort of drowsiness was creeping over her. The husks and shells destitute of the living substances which they are supposed to enclose, on which human creatures are content to feed, and the feeble conventional excuses which stand them in the stead of right, were horrible in all their soulless emptiness to her, now that she was nearing eternal realities.

"I cannot possibly believe," she said, "that anyone whom I respect and love, could willingly choose the darkness instead of the light. And, darling, you are clever enough to know what you are doing."

She spoke half dreamily, between waking and sleeping, without attempting to meet her niece's eyes. And Sara, who knew that in her quiet drives Aunt Jenny would often be overtaken with a sudden inclination to sleep, did not answer her; but continued her own reverie. "Should she try to emancipate herself? Would

it be worth the struggle? Could she take back her promise when once it had been given? Had she not always prided herself on her unchanging will—her unflinching purpose?” She remembered a story of a supposed witch in the Middle Ages; who—when she was asked by her judges to reveal the power by which she had exercised her spells—mastered herself by an effort even in the agony of torture, and scornfully declared, that it was simply the power which a strong nature could exercise over weak ones. “Have I not always been strong?” thought the girl in her pride. “Heaven defend me from weakness—whatever I may have to suffer. There is nothing so despicable as dull shifting incapacity.”

* * * * *

The next two days were unusually wet, and Sara (who, in her deference to Aunt Jenny's prejudices, seldom visited the “*Conversation-Haus*,” except for a concert or a ball) was persuaded to join a party of friends, who proposed to wile away the time by a visit to the gaming-tables.

Sara, to confess the truth, had rather an ad-

miration for the unusual sight. It was impossible, as she said, to feel sombre or *triste* in a building which made her think of an oriental palace; and which, with its blaze of lights from hundreds of wax-lights, reminded her of the tales of Haroun al Raschid.

"And then, you know," she added, a little sneeringly to Miss Armitage, "it is not like a gambling den which mocks the law in hidden darkness; but it is openly permitted—visited by the clergy—and smiled on by the respectable. Of course we shouldn't think of encouraging anything that was forbidden. And then Mr. Newton is going with us, and will bring his wife to play propriety. You know you can trust her to chaperone me anywhere. It is just for the sake of the sight you see. Everyone goes, now and then."

"What is it they play? I don't half understand it. I never know what they mean by *roulette*, or *rouge et noir*? I only know there is the same objection to it that there is to betting," said Miss Armitage wearily. "Men play them-

selves, at these fashionable places, into their graves, or the mad-houses, just as often as they do in low resorts."

"Hush, you are talking treason. I don't know much about it myself, but I am careful not to expose my 'greenness.' It is only *trente et quarante*, I believe, called in common parlance *rouge et noir*. Everybody knows all about it here," laughed Sara, in amusement at Aunt Jenny's fright. "One mustn't condemn a thing you know, before one sees it. And when a game is a pure venture of chance, it is really a little exciting to look at it."

For the first time she changed her mind when she was introduced to the scene. She had come, as she facetiously told her friends, to "gain an impressive moral lesson, which of course would be good for her." But whether Aunt Jenny's scruples had roused her seriously to consider; or whether she had taken more pains than usual to analyse the countenances of the crowd which surrounded the attractive table, she could not exactly have told. One

thing was certain ; she seemed to see beneath the surface.

Grave fashion was in the salon, and smooth respectability. The imprecations were only mental, the faces were controlled to show no emotion. And yet for the first time Sara seemed to be aware of the acquisitive expression on some of the haggard features; the insatiate greed of the gamester which could not be hidden. The truth seemed to face her in all its terrible nakedness; its original hatefulness, in spite of the outward trappings. She shuddered at the sight of the lean fingers resembling the claws of vultures rather than hands; at the unnatural pauses in the excitement of the play; the dead silences, which were only relieved by the rattle of the coin; or the sudden gabble of mongrel French and German, as some unsuccessful player slunk off with an appearance of indifference, perhaps to drown all regret in absinthe or opium.

For the first time the paint seemed evidently to be seen on the faces of some of the women

who were present. Sara felt half superstitious about it. What was all this to *her*? Surely there was some reason why the flaunting garishness of the place, and all the attractions of art which had formerly amused her, could not prevent her on this special occasion from sickening, as she had never done before, at the spectacle of this crowded amphitheatre of eager human faces, and the glittering piles of yellow pieces with which the green ground was so promptly covered?

"It is very warm," she whispered to Mrs. Newton, as this sense of loathing and disgust crept over her. "I don't like it; you promised me not to stay long."

"I can't go just yet," answered her friend; "I must find somebody to put down this double florin for me. I never can resist the fascination of the game, and we shan't burn our fingers terribly if we lose this insignificant coin."

"Don't—don't do it," exclaimed Sara eagerly; "you are giving your sanction to wickedness if you dabble with it; you don't know how

much mischief, how much terrible harm——”

She was interrupted by a tittering from her companion; and looking round her for an explanation of the laugh, which had evidently some meaning, she saw her future husband in one corner of the crowd of strangers, near a pile of napoleons, which had been swept into a heap. His dress was disordered, his cheeks unnaturally flushed, and his hands clenched to his forehead as the fatal click announced that his casual run of luck was ceasing.

It was evident that the recognition was mutual, for Rosswith was attempting to cower out of sight. Sara gazed for a minute with her eyes fixed on his face; and from the expression which spread over her own features, it might have appeared as if she herself were suddenly affected by the malaria of the place.

Then, moved by one of her quick, unreasonable impulses, she seized Mrs. Newton's arm authoritatively.

“It is *very* close here,” she repeated, in a raised voice, loud enough to be heard by others.

"I can't think of staying another minute. If you won't come with me I must go alone. I am very sorry to shorten your pleasure; but I detest the whole thing."

The case was growing desperate. Rosswith raised himself to his full height, and attempted to bow without venturing to leave his post. Her face lightened all over with a glow of indignation, as, followed now by her unwilling friends, and giving no other indication of being aware of his presence, she swept out of the room. There could be no mistaking the significance of her manner. She had given him the "cut" before all these people. Rosswith clenched his teeth, and muttered a suppressed curse. He was smarting with wounded vanity, for their engagement was known to many who were present, and he had not counted on such open discomfiture.

"Ladies will have their tantrums, I suppose," he said, attempting to speak jocosely to a friend, and settling himself again with pretended nonchalance to the game. "As if she was not aw-

fully extravagant herself! She'd sacrifice any amount of pearls to gratify a whim, like another Egyptian Queen, if *she* had the chance! Why, I am only just getting into my swing. Hang me if I'm going to stop for any amount of black looks." But his hand shook, and drops of perspiration stood upon his forehead.

"The run is upon red. I shall go for the red," he muttered, putting down a number of napoleons.

In a few seconds came the chant,

"Rouge perd et couleur."

He waited for two deals. Manque again!

* * * * *

About midnight Rosswith, dulled and stupefied, crept back to his hotel. His loss had not been very serious, but he had a sort of consciousness that his former insanity was recommencing. He was being drawn into the toils, and should have a heavy reckoning to pay for that day's work. A tiny note was awaiting his arrival. He read it mechanically, as if he had expected it to come.

"Miss Trevanion presents her compliments to

Mr. Maxwell, and hopes he will make it convenient to call upon her at eleven o'clock to-morrow morning."

He did not yet know Sara, as, tortured and hunted by the sense of the ruin which he fancied he had brought upon himself, he rushed out into the roads and woods, and paced about in a condition bordering upon madness for the greater part of that night.

"It is all over," he thought. "I needn't have sacrificed the love of the one creature in the world who cared for me. There is nothing left for me now but to do as so many poor wretches have done before me—to cut my own throat."

It would be a wild sort of revenge, with something theatrical about it, rather gratifying to his vanity, if she could hear of his corpse being found in the river, or lying stiff and stark on the bed in his lodgings, with a bottle of laudanum clutched in its fingers. He lingered on the thought with a little satisfaction, and lashed his courage up to the point of wishing such a *denouement* were possible. She, who had caused his death, should

never have another happy hour; if it were possible for the dead to appear to the living, he would haunt her to her life's end. But no, the sacrifice would involve too much. He pictured the gloomy river as it would look in the darkness of midnight; he imagined the gurgling sound of the water as it would come rushing into his ears, and—shuddered.

Rosswith Maxwell was one of those men who are very big at boasting, and who might do to play at tragedy on a stage in days of peace, but who, supposing them to be forced to serve their country in times of war, would be apt to show a preference for the drudgery of the commissariat.

CHAPTER V.

THERE was a reckless, dare-devil manner about the unhappy fellow, when he kept his appointment with Sara the next morning. There was no reticence or self-command about him. The servants of the hotel might have surmised by the fashion in which his clothes hung about him, by the untidiness of his hair and the swagger of his walk that his wild temper was regaining the ascendancy over him ; and that he was beginning to throw over all considerations of prudence, without even attempting to make the best of the position in which he was placed.

Sara kept him waiting for some minutes ; but at the first sight of her face he saw that she was like all high-spirited women—most brave when

strung up to the greatest pitch by an emergency.

She did not bring her Aunt with her, as she had hitherto done. She came in alone, and opened conversation at once upon the topic on which she had determined to speak.

"So you think you have lighted on a skeleton," he said, with a hoarse laugh; "it is only a mare's nest, I assure you."

"I have not complained about it," she answered, in a grave voice. "I have not written to my guardian. I have not even told Miss Armitage, but I think they would say I lighted upon a very formidable skeleton indeed. Mr. Maxwell, the skeleton must be done away with. This propensity of yours must be given up."

She thought she was justified in taking high ground with him, and took it accordingly, determining to cow him into submission. Hitherto she had found that she could always cow the spirit of this man, if she could not break it. If he muttered execrations when she opposed his will, they were muttered so low that she did

not hear them. His brutal nature had been kept so perfectly under control in her presence, that there were some observers who amused themselves by saying Miss Trevanion ruled her lover by the power of the eye.

All such control was swept to the winds now.

“What must be given up?” he demanded in a voice of thunder, forgetting all restraint in the violence of his passion. “Your overbearing haughtiness is intolerable. Who says that I have any gaming propensity—as you choose to call it? Do you think you are to issue your mandates like an Empress, and I am to obey with the drivelling idiotcy of a slave? Remember that you advised me to amuse myself in my own way, and I have simply taken your advice.”

He began to pace the room with the vehemence of a caged animal, and she stood looking on, not frightened but surprised by the violence of the storm. Perhaps she liked Rosswith all the better because he was capable of such passion,

though she shrank from him with a sort of physical shrinking, as she looked at his pale face, his knit brow, and his working lip.

He noticed that she shrank, and continued in the same strain.

“Do you think I am to be fettered by different laws from other men? Because I am seen in a billiard-room, is that to be conjured into an offence? Do you wish to empty me of my manhood, as you have deprived me of other things. Do I attempt to fetter *you*, to limit you in your flirtations? Do I venture to interfere with your behaviour in anything—even when you are making yourself the talk of the place?”

She smiled a little scornfully, as if the innuendoes were beneath her notice. “I certainly wish you to make me a promise,” she repeated, taking no notice of his excitement. “If you will not oblige me to take other people into our confidence in this matter, and are not prepared to risk the consequences, you *must* make the promise—that you will give up any sort of gaming from this time.”

She spoke more quietly than before, though still in cold measured tones ; for the sneer on his face, and the angry glitter in his eyes, warned her not to venture too far in her interference.

"On what ground am I make such a promise as this? It is an utterly unreasonable thing to expect—if you knew a little more of the world you would not attempt to extract it from me."

"On what ground," she repeated with involuntary bitterness,—“there is your *honour*. If there were no such word in our language as that, I should not be bound so helplessly to you.”

"Is that the way you speak of our engagement?" he said, "You don't care for me more than you do for a dead dog. You had better be free, and let me blow out my brains."

"Stop, sir," she said with a curl of her lip. "I never allow anyone to use coarse language in my presence; you needn't think to intimidate me by such threats. A man who blindly encounters the perils of another life, because he is

too great a coward to face the dangers of this one—is—is—”

Her voice faltered. She did not finish her speech.

There was silence for a few moments, till he looked at her again with a dark flush on his face, his eyes glittering with a tigerish glitter, and his lips working as if he would bite them between his teeth.

Sara stood by his side, impassive as a statue, only trying to stifle the aching of her heart, when suddenly he seized one of her little white hands, and put it to his lips. She heard the panting of his breath, as he grasped it to himself with a passionate gesture.

“Cannot you trust me?” he asked, speaking in quick gasps. “I had a glimpse of something like—Heaven, and you throw me back irrecoverably to the blackness of darkness—but I suppose it is too late to appeal to your tender mercies. I waste my words. You might have done anything with me, if you had only cared for me a little. I have made a mess of my life—I have

failed in everything. It is no use, I suppose, to ask you to be pitiful before I consign myself hopelessly to the dogs."

"Why am I to trust you, Rosswith?" she asked a little wearily; "did you always merit such confidence? I will put you on your trial once more about this matter, if you wish it; and if you have such an absurd dislike to being fettered by promises."

She answered nothing about caring for him. He released her hand: it was marked with red streaks, but he did not know it. He only thought, "She will be my wife in a few weeks, and then she will not dare to treat me like this. She always gets the better of me. A woman who can keep her temper is really to be feared. But I shall conquer her at last—proud and haughty as she is—I felt her hand tremble as I held it in mine."

He left her, almost blinded by the excess of his emotion. Everything seemed blurred and blotted to him as he stumbled into the outer air.

"She is bound to me—irrevocably bound," he repeated, scarcely knowing in the whirl of his brain whether he loved or hated her most.

Sara quietly rejoined her aunt, as if nothing had happened. It seemed to her as if she were incapable of feeling. After her fate was first fixed there had been a passionate cry for liberty—a beating of herself against the bars of her prison. Then the reaction had set in—the death in life. She had blamed Rosswith for his passionate talk of self-destruction, and yet had she not voluntarily driven herself into exile by her own deliberate act of self-suicide?

Miss Armitage and her niece continued for the allotted number of weeks at Baden, still sacrificing to the ægis of fashion; and during the month which had to elapse, it was noticed that Sara was harder, more defiant than before. She held herself more upright; and it was observed that she was paler, with the exception of the hectic flush which was becoming fixed in the cheeks, from which the fluctuating

colour seemed to have gone for ever. She still had occasional fits of merriment, but they were more irrelevant and extravagant than ever.

"Depend upon it, I was right," said one of the men who long ago had discovered that "Miss Trevanion was not happy,"—that, in fact, while she tried to look delighted, she only succeeded in looking woefully bored. "That blackguard Maxwell makes her miserable. But she will marry him all the same, if it be only for appearances. It's not one time in a thousand you come across a woman like that—a martyr to her pride. A smiling martyr too—game to the death."

CHAPTER VI.

IT was evening, early in the following November, damp and warm for the time of year. The atmosphere was close, and a little like what the English call "muggy," even in the white-streeted town of Brussels.

Sara, coming down from a solitary watch by her aunt upstairs, entered the unlighted sitting-room, and gazed out blankly on the rain-washed streets. She was in that peculiar state of weariness and depression of spirits, to which she had been constantly subject of late. She hated the sight of this large room in the Hôtel del'Europe, with its great mirrors and chandeliers, its unhomelike corners; and decided that as it was not yet dark she would not ring for lights.

"It is all very well for Aunt Jenny to like it,"

she thought as she tossed herself on a sofa, in a listless attitude, not having troubled to change the dainty slippers and pretty peignoir which she wore for the sake of greater ease in the sick room. "It won't do to move her too rapidly, but I am glad we are going back to England. I am tired to death of this life."

The "Rappelle" began to sound, and she rose from the sofa weary and heated, throwing open the window, with her usual disregard of any chance of taking cold.

She leant against the window-sill, listening to the last notes dying away in the distance—the tramp and rustle of feet and garments beneath her—the murmur of voices.

There was light enough to see the streets and the distant roofs of houses, but everything looked blank to her in her mood of vacant discontent. She was too bored and absent to notice the change to a dull leaden sky, where but a short time before the sun had been blazing so fiercely, making it blue with a painful blueness.

It was well perhaps that she did not take too

much heed of outward things, for she was in that state of mind when a perfume or a note of music may be replete with vanished pain, waking memory as sharply as if it had never slumbered. Her thoughts were far away; she was not trying to control them. For idle thinking had become a disease with her—a malady not to be resisted. She wished in vain to cover up those idols in the dark dens of the heart, which a chance idea might expose to her, in their naked ugliness. She had a dread of everything, even of herself.

Her feelings seemed to be congealed into a state of iciness, and yet it was characteristic of her nature that she hated dulness, and longed for any sensation to relieve this *ennui*—which was making her so tragically cynical in her weariness.

“The place is wretchedly slow,” she thought. “I begin to feel as if I were buried alive, shut up in a coffin, without room to breathe. I wonder if a bird suffers as much as I do, caged in sight of its native woods. And yet I am only

imprisoned by an inward necessity. The door of my cage may open yet, but I am so tired of it all, I doubt if I should care to make my escape."

Suddenly she started. There was surely some confusion in the street? What was it?—an accident?

She leant out—interested, and for the moment forgetting herself. Anything might be better than the present vacuity: anything would make a change—even an *émeute*. The noise seemed to increase; there was a clamour and sudden uproar, a Babel of tongues.

"I wonder," she thought, "if a mob in Brussels is as tiresome and ill-regulated as a mob in London?"

The crowd seemed to gather, turning the corner of the Rue de Montague, and hurrying past the window of the hotel. Suddenly it parted, swaying to and fro, and Sara recoiled involuntarily, as it revealed a glimpse of something—somebody—was it a man?—lying on an extemporized shutter. The gas had just been

lighted, and flared up, showing her—blood. Sara had a woman's horror of anything dreadful, and she drew back with a shudder—pulling the curtain across the window, and ringing violently for the candles. And the crowd swept on, bearing the figure on the shutter, which lay with the face partially downwards, in the same attitude in which it had been taken up from the slimy road. Its garments were soiled with mud, but with the exception of one red mark upon the head, and another just below the jaw, there was nothing particularly horrible about it, unless the proneness of the attitude, the closed eyes, and the unnatural pallor was horrible.

* * * * *

“Pauline, what was the matter outside?” Sara asked her maid, who had just entered the room, busy as usual with the patterns of dresses which she was preparing for her mistress's trousseau.

Pauline shrugged her shoulders, and declared that she knew nothing at all. What for should she frighten Mademoiselle? Somebody was

hurt, she thought—a quarrel they said—men always quarrelled. And then they were Englishmen, at least the gentleman was English, and, she begged Mademoiselle's pardon, but the English were so—she used a word which might be translated “pugnacious;” and, in spite of much useless gesticulation, it seemed that Pauline had nothing more to say about it.

Sara was disappointed, for she was sometimes amused by the loquacity of her maid, who brought her accounts of what was going on. But she tried to beguile her time with discussing details about the finery which was being prepared for her in Brussels, and which she told herself might as well have decorated featureless faces; she knew that in the old times she would have looked better without it. She had to give directions about the enormous boxes in which the dresses were being packed, the bonnets which she had determined to purchase in Paris, the ball costumes, and the pretty walking toilettes. And yet how she was beginning to hate the purple and fine linen, the delicate laces, and the brilliant

petticoats which seemed to dazzle her eyesight.

Pauline lingered when these matters were done with. "Would not Mademoiselle go to bed? Mademoiselle would spoil her eyes with reading."

"Soon," said Sara; "she did not feel in a humour yet," and she returned again to her book. But it was slow; she was not interested. It was seldom she was interested by any book at present.

She took a letter from her pocket, and turned it over. The writer was Lawrence Routh. Sara had seen little of him after his highly unsatisfactory visit to Spa. But he wrote to her often, and his were short letters, that could not bore the reader, but might remind her of his existence.

"She has taken the bit between her teeth," he thought, "and now there is nothing more to be done but for me to wait."

And he (who had learned the maxim of a wise man in a hard school) continued to wait, as he had ever done, in perfect patience.

"I must not put her mistake before her," he reflected; "it will only make her dislike me. The voice of her essential nature must speak, and no other tongue. I daresay it is speaking already; but some people can never confess themselves to be wrong. My chief fear is that she has too great a dread of the judgment of the world to allow her to go back from her absurd contract."

She read his letter, curling her lip with a gesture of impatience.

"—— Club.

"DEAR SARA,

"In your last you speak of your marriage taking place on the 20th of December as a settled matter. If this be so, I hope your coming to town will take place soon. I have your interests (monetary) in my hands, and I am responsible for them. There will be much to settle. I am sorry to hear such poor accounts of Janet, but it would be better for you to tra-

vel while she is able to do so. Does she see Dr.
T—— ?

“ Believe me,

“ Ever yours faithfully,

“ LAWRENCE ROUTH.”

“ The 20th of December,” repeated Sara. “ He does not attempt to argue with me any more. He tried to give me many a sharp lesson about it just at first, and I have to thank him ; but even *he* is resigned to it now. And the time is drawing near—no, I will not think, for ‘ that way madness lies.’ ”

She let the letter fall from her fingers, and smote her hands sharply together ; stooping her proud head in a momentary spasm of desolation. What was she about to do ?—to swear away her liberty, her future, her very soul ; to put it out of her power to be noble or high-minded from that time forth ; to perjure herself with false vows ; to sow her death-bed with thorns ? The world might speak loosely, and think lightly of such things. But Sara Trevanion was

no such self-deceiver when she wrestled alone with the extremity of her anguish, daring not even to look to Heaven for help in her struggle.

It was absurd to tell herself she would not think, now that the constant round of amusement was over. It is only in fluttering, as Voltaire bitterly said, that natures such as these when they are doing violence to their purer instincts, can hope to lose the consciousness of pain.

"There is one comfort," she said to herself. "I can't go on feeling it like this for ever."

She had flung her treasures away by her own voluntary act, and now she felt as if she were watching them, as they were borne from her by the tide. Just a few more useless eddies, a few tiny bubbles, and the waters of her life would settle themselves calm and unmoving, with these best treasures lost—irrevocably lost!

"Yes," she thought, "time will help me. But I don't deceive myself. I know very well what I have to expect."

Then she raised her face again, and spoke

aloud—dashing the words from her lips, as though the scorn in them stung her.

“He never loved me—and I do not repent it.”

No, she knew nothing of repentance yet. She fancied that Will and Honour must bind her to her bargain; but she had yet to discover that her pride was her shame, and that the noblest thing a man or a woman can do is to be true to the higher teaching of an inward monitor.

In her soul contending powers had been clashing, but the contest was almost over now. The voice to which Lawrence Routh had referred, in language which might have been worthy of an old Greek philosopher, was speaking faintly, and more faintly within her: she was almost ceasing to hear it at all. The sun had shone on her with fitful flashes. Occasionally the light, penetrating and keen, had darted into her soul's inmost depths; but it could not arouse her torpid conscience from its stupor. She did not attempt to shut her eyes to the

truth, she could not force herself to believe a lie. On the contrary, the warnings which she had tried to put on one side, though she knew they had been spoken in good faith, and the words which she could not forget, were continually echoing in her ears.

It was true that she would not go back from her contract, but Lawrence Routh did not know that it was innate pride and not fear of the world that held her to it; he was very far from measuring her nature yet.

"No," she said, "there is no retracing my steps—no going back now, though a path sharp with thorns may be stretching before me. I must bear up bravely, or I shall lose even my self-respect. I am irrevocably pledged, I cannot draw back."

It seemed as if in the fatal step she had taken, her moral sense had been partially obscured. She had attempted to confound that moral sense more and more by bewildering arguments with which she deceived herself. And yet, it was very

tedious and vexatious, that again and again the truth would glare on her, like a naked eye through the darkness.

CHAPTER VII.

THE following morning was misty, and somewhat chilly. The early daylight was stealing into a small mean room in one of the back streets in Brussels. Through the dirty window-panes, some of which were broken, the trees of well-known thoroughfares were seen, standing weird and ghost-like, like so many thin sign-posts in the distance ; and broken lines of tall white houses hinted the existence of a fashionable city.

But close around the narrow room were blocks of habitations, with queer-looking gable roofs, and with old wooden balconies ; which, from their rickety, worm-eaten condition, suggested the possibility of an easy method of committing

suicide, where old carpets were shaken, and wet clothes constantly hung out to dry. The dilapidated street, with its round uneven paving-stones, painful to the tread; its narrow passages, and gloomy arched doorways, had an air of antique grandeur, in which Rembrandt would have delighted. Within the room, on a low bedstead, which stood in a sort of cupboard recess, and had a pretence of dirty hangings about it, was lying the man (or it might be the corpse of the man, from the strange quietness and proneness of the position) who had been brought here on a shutter on the previous evening, and which still lay apparently without breath or motion, shaping the bedclothes into a heap like a mound in a graveyard.

The red marks on the face which had caused Sara to shudder with such physical repugnance, were no longer visible. But the head had been bound up with a coloured handkerchief, and there was a certain ominous pallor beneath the bronzed skin, extending in purple hue to the parched dry lips, which made the doctor who

had been hastily summoned to the sick man, and who had managed to pick his way, not without some internal grumbling, over the broken pavement, and the pitfalls on the unmended stairs, stop abruptly and shake his head.

He had entered the room with his usual brisk look and authoritative manner, but he shook his head again with a more conclusive shake, when the figure, which had lain as still as if it had been cut out of yellow wax, made a sudden jerking movement, the face twitching and hands clutching, as if the movement had been involuntary, or had been caused by the sudden spring of some hidden machinery.

The doctor was an Englishman. For the French doctors, who had despaired of finding any clue to the wounded man's belongings, had preferred to shift the responsibility of the medical treatment upon one of his own nation. Dr. Ford examined his patient, remarked to himself on a partial return of the comatose condition, which was merciful under the circumstances, and then looked curiously around

him, struck by the strangeness of the scene.

Everything conveyed the sense of desolation. A jug of cold water was standing on the red-bricked floor by the bedside, and some drops of it had been sprinkled on the forehead, and on the hot weary eyelids of the unconscious sufferer. There was something in the look of the face which reminded him of a burnt-out lamp, something which betrayed the existence of violent passion in the lines about the sallow features.

An old crone, with a colourless, toothless, wizened face, wrinkled all over as if marbled with streaks, a face seldom to be seen in English old age, lifted her grizzled eyebrows, and forehead ridged like the "ribbed sea-sand," interrogatively for a moment, and then continued swinging herself backwards and forwards with a monotonous mechanical swing, which was intended to be expressive of sorrowful sympathy, as she continued her watch by the bedside, ever and anon watching the doctor eagerly with a look of cunning on her parchment features, to discover her chances of being paid handsomely for the job.

And then, as if to complete the incongruous accessories, a little child, with dirty flaxen hair, came toddling into the room, and stood looking with big-eyed wonder at the thing on the bed, contentedly munching a crust, till it was called sharply by its mother, who made one amongst a group of square-featured Belgians, with squalid acquisitive faces, whose morning slumbers had been cut short by curiosity, and who had now completed their hasty toilets, and were peeping in at the doorway.

Dr. Ford looked grave.

"We must have perfect quietness," he said; "the case is a serious one. He is wounded—badly wounded—head knocked about. How long ago was he brought here?"

He moved to the window as he spoke, using all his efforts to open it, and breaking a pane of glass when such efforts proved futile, to relieve the air of the heavy miasma which hung about the sick room.

He gathered from the old woman, who answered him in patois, that it was only last night.

A street row—he surmised from the account which she gave—possibly a drunken quarrel. And yet the man on the bed, as he mentally argued, looked a little superior to this sort of thing.

“Was there any woman mixed up with the matter?” he asked, trying to get at a clue to the mystery; “possibly it was an attempt at duelling—did the police know anything about it?”

“But—yes—yes, certainly. The police were on the track, and would do what could be done. There had certainly been some fighting, and the combatants had dispersed. *Hein*—it was something frightful!”

All this was gesticulated with hands, shoulders, and eyes, as if the withered old woman, with her furrowed yellow skin, were one of those gutta-percha puppets, which can be shaken into hideous shapes for the amusement of modern babies.

The doctor, a man of few words, did not ex-

press his opinion at once ; but asked one more quick imperative question, to interrupt the torrent of words.

“ Did she rightly know whether this Englishman had any proper concern in the matter, or whether he had been robbed or ill-treated himself?”

“ *Ciel*, what should she know about it? Bah, bah! all the Englishers were fond of interfering. Figure to yourself blood flowing—confusion, noise—what not—and the foreign gentleman pausing, as he was certain to do. . . . Ah-h-h !”

This was the gist of the answer, which was poured out in rapid jargon, and very difficult to comprehend. Then getting more and more confused in her talk, and finding, from the mystified expression of the doctor's face, how difficult it was to make him understand, the crone suddenly ceased from taking exercise on her stool, and concentrated all her efforts on a shrill squeak for her son “ Jacques ”—a squeak which made

the muscles of her throat swell up like discoloured bits of whipcord.

Jacques, who was the master of the house, made his appearance, pulling an imaginary forelock, and rubbing his closely-clipped head which was covered with a stubbly growth of the colour of tow, and which protruded bull-like beneath the short-cropped hair, as if he were bent on rubbing some sense into it.

Jacques,—who was a contrast to his mother in having, instead of a withered, spare frame, an enormous superabundant bodily development, over which he threw a loose light coat, and a good-tempered rubicund face—supplemented the old woman's story of referring again solemnly to the police, as to a power mysterious and infallible.

"The police would find out the gentleman's friends," said he confidently, as if determined to take a cheery view of the case. "The gentleman was rich, there couldn't be a doubt of it."

"But my good fellow, you must be prepared

to take the risk of that," said the doctor abruptly, "just as I must take the risk of losing my fees. Things are not always what they seem. And when a man wears good clothes they are not always his own. Why in the world did you bring him in here? He would have done fifty times better at the hospital."

The old woman gave an inharmonious wail, looked reproachfully at Jacques, and commenced swinging herself again, as though she were swinging for a sacrifice to Vishnu; while the son's face, in which the better sort of the Belgic characteristics were predominant, looked blank for a moment, and then cleared again.

"Courage, *mon ami*," he reiterated; "the gentleman was rich—there could be no doubt of that. There was the diamond ring in the hands of the police, and, though Monsieur's purse was empty, which looked like foul play, still it had been a handsome purse. And then there was the watch—it could be sold to pay expenses—the police would not prevent that. And (here was the crowning point) Monsieur's relations

would be found, and they would pay like English people generally paid."

"My good friend, that is all very well; but what was the excuse for bringing the gentleman here?—you may get yourself into a difficulty," asked the doctor, losing patience.

Jacques' face brightened again. "The surgeon would be responsible. The kind surgeon who had first of all bound up the wounds, and who, it seemed, had given it as his decided opinion that it would be dangerous to take the foreign gentleman as far as the hospital."

"Was he unconscious when they brought him in?" asked the doctor, as he gave some directions about the treatment.

"Yes," answered the man naïvely. "It was very provoking; Monsieur had never spoken—at least not intelligibly. There were plenty who knew the English; and if he would only speak it would save a world of trouble."

Just at this moment the patient started, and seemed to be convulsively wrestling with something.

"Does he often repeat that action?" asked Dr. Ford, as he bent down his ear to listen to his mutterings.

"Sometimes he dashes about him with his arms—so—" the man imitated the spasmodic movements—"and then he lies quieter than ever."

"With that heaving of the chest with which he is breathing his life out," added the doctor, who, after putting his ear to the patient's lips, could make nothing of the vague sounds, "there may be a brief period of consciousness, but I doubt if you will ever hear any explanation from *him*. He's not in a fit state to give an account of himself; fever has set in, and the brain seems to be hopelessly wandering."

The doctor re-arranged some bandages for the head, and then, drawing aside the ragged curtain from the bedstead, and moving to a little distance, he looked with a sort of cynical compassion at the sufferer.

"Who was he—where did he come from?"

Dr. Ford had not passed through thirty years' experience in a hard, professional school without knowing much about life, and becoming something of a physiognomist. His physiognomical skill detected the *brutezza* in the fine features of his patient.

"And yet he is probably well-born," he thought. "The form of cheek, mouth, and forehead, the very colour of the complexion, tell of degradation from a more promising type. The *brutezza* must have been to a certain extent acquired. I ought to be familiar, too, by this time with the plentiful crops of misery which are every day being reaped by my countrymen, after their sowing of dragons' teeth. I should say that this fellow had sown them abundantly. The thirst for pleasure would be strong in him ; but he is just the man who would embroil himself in a fight, not so much from bravery as from recklessness, without waiting to think of the consequences."

The doctor satisfied himself before he left that

the sick man had no cards about him, no marks on his linen save initials, "R. M," and no scraps of paper in his pocket-book to betray his name or friends.

There was one letter which was shown to him when he made his enquiries—a letter which had been found in the pocket of the wounded *inconnu*—that seemed to give some chance of a clue to the discovery of his friends, if friends he had any, which might be dubious.

The note was without envelope or address, and was found in conjunction with two other torn papers, also without names or means of identification—the one from an angry creditor, reminding of a debt, the other apparently from a bill discounter.

Dr. Ford made entries of these papers in his note-book, that he might communicate with the somewhat inefficient "police," in whom the landlord seemed to place such unbounded confidence. But the private letter seemed to him to be of sufficient importance to induce him to take one

of the splay-footed chairs, and settle himself seriously to its perusal. It ran thus :—

“ Sept. 30th.

“ I have not written to you since last we met, because—keeping a watch upon you—I found you had been better than your word, in one way, and had done what you could to repair an injury. Do you know that it was too late? The slanders you circulated drove Dorothy from her only home, and since May she has been searched for—in vain. In vain, until two days since, when Charley, her sister, reached Otswold Bay in South Wales, to find her—dead. Why do I write this? I fancy I hear you question. Perhaps because I have a faint hope that the information will touch you—that hearing of the dead, who died loving you faithfully to the end (though, God forgive you, Rosswith, you were as truly her murderer as though you had given her poison with direct intent to end her days), that hearing of this may make you pause to consider, and may possibly

bind you more closely to the living—to whom I pray you may ever be faithful. “BRYAN.”

Only “Bryan.” What clue could there be in this signature, for it was probably a christian name?

Dr. Ford held the letter, gravely scanning its contents. It was worn and soiled, as though the owner had carried it constantly, and it had been well read.

The doctor looked again at his patient's face. It was the face of a man whose age it would be difficult to tell. He might be young, or he might be old—this man with the form which might once have been almost Olympian in its modelling; but which was now worn and haggard with fast living, or wearing anxiety.

“*Mon Dieu!—qu'il s'ecrie,*” muttered the old crone, lifting the water which stood by the bedside, for the hundredth time with her tremulous skinny hands to the fevered lips of the sufferer—“*vraiment c'est horrible! Tiens—il appelle.*”

The doctor leaned forward, listened, and drew

back with a visible start. His ears had caught the sound of a ghastly blasphemy which had unconsciously made him shiver—not that it made him wonder—it was to be expected.

If his science had taught him that in these states of delirium even the pure-minded might utter words with which they would not otherwise sully their lips, what was to be expected in a case like this, where the outer covering of whitewash had been torn away, and the soul had to be swept free of the unclean and noisome things which had been harboured within it?

“What does he see? What remembrances are before him?” thought the doctor, as the man raised his head from the pillow—glared about him with vacant eyes, and then sank back with a groan.

“Unconscious, but a brief period of consciousness may ensue”—was again the comment of the watcher.

There was no time to be lost, and he hurried away, to consult with his coadjutors, and finally to insert advertisements to “Bryan” in the

foreign and English papers, informing him of the accident and dangerous illness of "R. M.," to whom he wrote in September.

CHAPTER VIII.

MEANWHILE, what visions did the sick man see, as days passed, and he tossed in delirium on his lonely bed?

What visions did he see in his intervals of scattered consciousness, when he could not express himself clearly to others, but felt as if scathed by a fire of remorse, and would willingly have made a *tabula rasa* of his life?

He had lingered a few days at Baden after Sara left, having arranged not to travel with her (she preferred to go alone), but to meet her at Brussels by the end of the week. He could never clearly explain, or even recall to his own memory, what happened in the interval. He only knew that he was becoming a wreck of his former self, overwhelmed with debts which he

could not possibly discharge, and which were increased day by day by his systematic extravagance. His engagement to Sara had been the cause of this extravagance. He had appearances to keep up which involved lavish expenditure, and he accused her of selfishness and cruelty in deferring the marriage. He had intended to keep faith with her, but when he was left alone in Baden, the demon of play took possession of him again. What right had Miss Trevanion to deprive him of a fair method of replenishing his exchequer?

So far he remembered, then all became vague.

He was dreaming, he thought, and in the dream there came before him the familiar scene of a gaming-room and a dark-eyed Italian, who pressed his acquaintance on him. Where had he met this sinister-looking man before? What had he taken?—had the wine been drugged that he was half drunk? And how did he know that the man liked high play, and took advantage of the confusion of his brain to press it on him? It was not likely that he would have confided

his purpose to him. The lights were flashing before his eyes, the croupiers were presiding like magicians over the game, the money was rattling, the eager figures were stooping forward, and he knew that the gambling fever was on him. His blood was hot, his head was dizzy. And in the midst of it all he seemed to be endowed with a separate existence, and to see himself playing with the desperation of a ruined gamester. How was it that suddenly the whole thing changed, and it was he himself who, with sleepy laughter, was sweeping his winnings into a heap? Was it devilry or magic which suddenly had come to his assistance?

Was it all a dream—he didn't know—that continued play for high stakes, in which others urged him on, and in which he seemed to see the hungry glance of a pair of eyes—wild eyes like those of a maddened animal baulked of its prey—fixed on the heap of gold which by some miracle had become his? The figure seemed to change, and to melt into thin air. It laughed like Mephistopheles, as if it relished its discom-

future; and yet he seemed to hear a mutter of unutterable hate, which was only kept within bounds by respect for the bystanders. What did it whisper, with those frightful eyes fixed upon him?—something about following him to Brussels, to try the luck with him again? By-the-by, had he come to Brussels at all?—was he at Brussels or Baden? It was all a maze.

He wondered he had not been frightened at the reappearance of the same man, who staggered past him in some narrow dark *speise-saal*—where could it have been? Why hadn't he been alarmed at the grind of his teeth, and the cruel twitch of the muscles round the corners of the mouth? But then it was all a dream, and he had been half drunk.

Was he drunk still? Where was he now? A glaze came before his eyes as he tried to look round. What was pressing down his head with a fifty-pound weight? Was it the heap of gold that he had won? He began to feel for the forgotten gold, and tore off the bandages which concealed his wounds, and which had been carefully arranged where the hair had

been cut away, and where plaisters had been placed on the bruised and bleeding head.

The violent fit ceased, and he sank with sheer exhaustion, shaking from head to foot, biting his lips till they bled, and clutching the bed-clothes, in vain search for his lost winnings.

Then again the scene changed. He was paddling a boat across a shallow stream. Where had he seen that stream before ? The wind was whispering among the sedges, the swallows wheeling in their flight ; and here and there, if you looked close enough, you could see the trout in its crystal depths. Two girls were sitting by his side ; one of them had taken off her hat and was weaving waterlilies in her hair. Suddenly her face changed to the hue of death ; she was clothed in black, and had the features of a fury. An unutterably troublous sky prepared the imagination for something strange and dreadful, the stream was replaced by a woebegone desert, and the dreamer shrank as from some appalling sight, making frantic efforts to throw himself from the bed.

"The brain is injured," the doctor said; "if he lives he will be insane."

And they who heard the report cared nothing about it. He was unknown to the people who had taken him in—not out of charity or kindly impulse—but in the hope of making a "good thing" out of the job; and they troubled themselves as little as they could about him. Only the old crone shook and trembled, crossing herself now and then, as she listened to the torrent of wild words that passed from those dry lips.

No answer had come as yet to the advertisement, and Dr. Ford could make nothing of these incoherent ravings. Who was the "Dorothy" of whom he implored forgiveness, and of whose ghostly presence he seemed to be for ever conscious, even whilst he was talking to some other woman, or playing over again exciting games—counting cards, adding up coins, and cursing his losses—or bragging of his one stroke of extraordinary good luck?

"Oh, it was a pity, certainly a pity," he ex-

claimed when he was somewhat quieter on the second day, "that she should break her heart for a wretch like me—the poor, pale, fluttered, frightened little thing."

And then in one of the garrulous confidential moods, when he babbled of his boyish days—the shooting excursions at The Towers, and the skating when the mere was frozen over—which generally came over him when he saw the long red beard and bluff honest English face of his medical attendant, he explained in minute detail.

"I've been to tea at the Priory; we had clotted cream and house-made bread—everything fitted for Arcadia; and a great *pièce de resistance* in the shape of a round of beef, in deference to my grosser tastes. Fare simple enough for the Shakers, you know; that is their way in Arcadia—such a dove's nest of a place. We went in for astromony, which I know nothing about, and staid on the lawn after tea, (I had my arm round her waist, and there was nobody to see us,) counting the stars in the tail of the Great Bear. I told Dorothy I'd been suffering from a transi-

ent attack of nightmare ; and she invited me to come to the dance—of death.”

This, and a great deal more much in the same vein—interspersed with drowsy laughter—was poured into the ears of the unwilling doctor, who the minute afterwards heard his patient shrieking.

“ Ah, false, faithless, don’t leave me, as I left her ; it will take all the life I have left in me if you do. She struck her curse right into my side, and left it like a fiery serpent at my heart.” Then suddenly he added, sinking his voice, “ She is standing there in her winding-sheet, with her golden hair streaming behind her, as she always stands night and day. Her eyes are closed, but they are blue through the lids. Don’t stir or look behind you, or she will lay hold of you, and then for a certainty you’ll go mad.”

The third day and the fourth passed much in the same way. The stage of wild delirium seemed to be passing off for a time, the sick fancies were ceasing, and he was conscious : the doctor said he was sinking.

The fifth day came, and with it (neck-and-neck with the grim messenger) Bryan Maxwell.

Dr. Ford met him as he was striding up the rickety stairs. He had been prepared for his coming, for Bryan had sent a telegram the day before.

"You know his condition?" he asked, surveying the anxious face and travel-stained garments of the new-comer, whilst Bryan handed him his card.

"I know nothing—but that I am not too late. Could you do nothing—is there no hope?"

"None at all. I cannot deceive you," answered the doctor—looking with compassion on the painfully delicate face of this brother (he had been informed of the relationship between the two men) whose composure was so evidently forced by an effort which might cost him dear—"he is dying."

"Dying!" The words fell like a knell upon Bryan's ears, as he passed into the room, and stood looking upon the man whose whole past

life he had so seriously condemned, and whose last angry sayings of passionate defiance seemed to be branded into his memory. Dying!—how gladly would Bryan have given his life for him. He had wished to put a world's width between himself and this son of his mother, whose conduct he had so seriously disapproved. His honest heart had burnt hotly within him, when he had listened to those unguarded and unrepented words. But now that the reckoning day had come, when the man who had been as an enemy to him, in spite of the near relationship—the man who had ruined his life—lay prostrate here, he recognized only the brother with whom he had played in childhood.

The wrong and the vengeance were nothing to him now. The dying man had rights over him, which the living could never have claimed.

Bryan was absorbed in the surprise of the sudden change, the outward symbols of the new phase of existence which was coming upon the soul that had made so little preparation to meet it. He was hushed with the terrible awe

of the coming death-struggle. The tears came into his eyes as they had never done since he was a boy, as the dark shadow, which so evidently hung over Rosswith, pleaded for a merciful verdict from his brother, in a way which no flimsy excuses, and no consideration of extenuating circumstances, could otherwise have done. Perhaps, after all, he thought—he, who had been constituted differently—had scarcely been able to weigh the temptations of this fellow-creature, who seemed to know no law but the unceasing thirst for pleasure. Perhaps he had judged him with the intolerance of a recluse; his judgment was more charitable, less sweeping now.

“Ross—” he said hoarsely, staggering from fatigue and the intensity of his excitement, as he tried to come near to him—“Ross, do you know me?”

But the bleared, half-glazed eyes met his without a ray of intelligence—the eyes which had once been so remarkable for their beauty,

but which were now gazing, great and dim, with a blank look into uncertainty.

There was a hushed silence in the room, during which the hag rose, and tried to support the sick man's head with a ragged pillow. There were no blinds in the room to exclude the light of day, so that the clear winter sunshine streamed in through the greenish panes of common glass, and fell—not only on the dilapidated furniture, and the soiled and dusty floor, but on the pinched features, and already yellow skin of the dying man, bringing out more clearly the changes in his appearance.

The effect of the nightly debauches, and the daily sensuous indulgences, which had enervated the poor body—remoulding it gradually from the perfection of an Apollo into the likeness of a Silenus—were sufficiently evident now. He was no longer beautiful, but in certain moments almost horrible, with his features convulsed with spasms of pain, grasping at the bedclothes, and trying to raise himself upright.

“All sin is abnormal,” thought Bryan, in his

agony. "You cannot break the laws of nature without paying the penalty."

There lay the owner of broad lands and ancestral name, in the prime of his manhood, alone with Death, with no gentle woman-fingers to wipe the damp dew from the cold forehead, or the livid lips—not even a dog to wail over his loss.

Bryan groaned aloud as he leant over him again, and touched him gently on the shoulder.

"Ross," he repeated, a little louder and more distinctly.

The eyes which looked at him awfully, as if already measuring the secrets of eternity, closed and unclosed again, with a faint glimmer of recognition. The dying man strained to speak, but the sound came only in a voiceless whisper. The old woman lifted the jug of water, and tried by dumb action to make him drink.

"That—you," he muttered, incoherently, turning to his brother. "Why did you let them send that witch to attend me—you know how I always hated ugliness? Send Hecate to her

own infernal regions—don't let her poison me," and he burst into one of his fits of wild laughter.

Presently there came a more lucid interval, and he attempted to ask a few significant questions.

"When did I come?" answered Bryan to the least exciting of these questions. "I came just now—directly I could. I had so far to travel. Tell me what I can do for you?"

He made a desperate effort.

"Dorothy," he said—"was it—I forget—was it—all true?"

Bryan's face darkened. When he had written the letter which had been found in Rosswith's pocket, he had felt as if he could not write the words which would have been strong enough to express his sense of the injury his brother had inflicted on an innocent girl, lest they should be too blackening, too branding. And yet he had hinted at the truth.

"You said," continued the wounded man, succeeding, by a desperate effort, in raising himself

on his elbow, with a shadow of the passion that had so often in past times distorted his face. "You said that it was I—who—— How did you *dare* to say it?"

The voice was pathetic rather than stern which answered.

"It was you who wrung the truth from me—I would have spared you, Ross. But why recur to such painful remembrances? It is of no use for us to discuss them now. When the day is gone, we cannot recall the sunshine. Ross, it would be useless for me to deceive you. You *know* it is all past; you know you cannot live through your life again."

The sick man sank back on his pillow, and suddenly burst into the senseless laughter which made the listener's blood run cold.

"We had plenty of scoundrels for our ancestors," he said. "I shall only add another to the charming list. I came into the world constituted as I am. I couldn't escape the hereditary influences.—I have been always blind—I am only just beginning to see. And seeing does me no

good now." Then, as Bryan shifted his position, he called affrightedly, "Stay—stay—don't leave me alone—I am terrified at—I don't know what—only keep by my side."

"I mean to stay," said Bryan reassuringly, his heart sinking as he made the answer. Could his staying do anything to take away the cloud of darkness which hung over this seared and imbruted heart? It was terrible," he thought, "to die like this." A strange awe conquered his sorrow.

There was silence again. The sudden flicker of life seemed to be wavering and dying out. Rosswith sank back once more upon the bed, and lay still, with occasional catchings of the breath. Bryan pressed nearer to him, and put his hand upon the wrist. There was an evident subsidence of the pulse; the blood was ebbing slowly through the frozen veins. But the comatose condition was not to return, for presently he moved his lips again. His voice had become once more indistinct. Bryan bent forward to listen.

"Forgive me," he faltered.

"That I do. If I have anything personally to forgive—I don't know it."

"You—have—I tried to persuade myself that I did not keep you—out of your—share—but I used my——"

"No matter," said Bryan rapidly ; "I forgive you, don't think of it."

"That's not all—you'll have it now—but I knew Sara—poor Sara—didn't love me, and I found out—who——"

"Ross—Ross !" implored Bryan. "Speak of yourself—not of——Don't let us speak of that. Confess to your Maker, and make your peace with Him."

The dying man had had small faith in the efficacy of prayer, and some indistinct thought passed through his confused brain that it would be mean and cowardly to pray for pardon now, when the day for proving the sincerity of repentance had gone.

However imperfect his religious feelings might be, he had at that moment a "trembling" of the

soul, a time of agony, a dread of what might come after life. He felt as if hanging on an abyss of uncertainty, while the past was merged into the future, and the future into the past—all vague, uncertain, and unreal.

“Shall I send for a clergyman, Ross?”

“No,” he muttered. “He’ll read the communion service—and there’s no—time—to spare.”

“Ross, do you remember when you were an innocent child—do you remember our mother teaching us from the Bible? Many an one is allowed to pass from innocence to youth, from youth to grievous sin, and back again to repentance, subdued and purified for the further life struggle . . . I should have hoped it might have been so with you. But perhaps the struggle might have been too hard for you. This is not the time to talk of previous influences—of bad education, and unfortunate surroundings. But you know you were conscious of moral responsibility. You can’t undo your miserable, dissipated life. But you can repent. Pray, brother, pray—I believe in the efficacy of prayer,

and in what is more important, the forgiveness of sins—believe in sin blotted out, and done away.”

The words were poured out rapidly and earnestly, for the time was indeed short. The speaker had sunk unconsciously on his knees: the drops of cold perspiration forced themselves on his brow: his voice was raised in an agony of pleading.

But the eyes of the dying man were only growing dimmer, the pulses were beating yet more faintly. And in that chaos of sense, where all things were unreal and uncertain, he heard the agonized voice of his brother—heard it only like a faint, monotonous sound, as if barriers of distance were already dividing them.

All was quiet for a little while, save the panting of the sick man’s breath.

Bryan knew that he had ceased to hear him, and sent in haste for Dr. Ford.

They poured brandy down his throat, and he roused with a sudden burst of energy.

“She never loved me,” he exclaimed. “Tell

her that it's best like this—tell her to be——”

It could not last. The arms fell—the breath caught. His eyes wandered and rested on his brother's face. “God bless you!” he said—and died.

CHAPTER IX.

“YOU are going there now?”

“Now—at once,” answered Dr. Ford.

“And her name—your patient’s name, you say—is Miss Armitage, and the name of her niece—Miss Trevanion?”

“Yes, it would be a curious coincidence indeed, if they did not happen to be the same people.”

“I will come with you,” said Bryan quietly. “The younger lady was engaged to my brother, and I have much to say to her. But I would not have her called as a witness in any criminal prosecution—even if the supposed criminal could be traced—which is an utter impossibility, you say.”

“Why, you see there was some suspicion of

foul play, but public opinion inclines to the idea that it was simply a violent quarrel. No stronger implement seems to have been used than a heavy stick, and the English are always supposed to be pugilistic. A sick man's ravings are not to be depended upon, nor can I conscientiously declare that Mr. Maxwell was at any time of his illness in a proper state to give an account of what had happened. If there had been any robbery, for instance—was it likely they would have left the purse?"

"The lapse of time would make it difficult to prove anything now," answered Bryan wearily, in tones which were painfully altered from his usual mellow voice. "And I don't believe that he would have wished it."

It was the day after Rosswith's death. Bryan had spent the greater part of the night in the room in which the corpse of his brother lay. And the dark shadow on the dead face, with the ghastly sight of the clenched knuckles relaxing their clasp of the bedclothes, painfully haunted his recollection.

They walked on together in silence. Had Bryan yielded to his natural impulses he could have turned with sick shuddering from the brisk keen morning air, sharp, crisp and wonderfully invigorating, with the clear sunlight bringing everything into distinctness of outline, and the mockingly rejoicing blue sky overhead, flecked with white clouds and brilliant in its gladness. But there was further work to be done—more still to encounter; and he mastered himself by a vehement effort, going steadily towards the Hôtel de l'Europe.

Dr. Ford entered, and asked for Miss Armitage.

“Et ce monsieur peut-il voir Mademoiselle Trevanion?”

The garçon would enquire. And while Dr. Ford made his way upstairs, Bryan was shown into their saloon—to wait. It was empty, with books, principally novels, tossed carelessly about, all of which seemed to be imbued with some mysterious personality. There was an open workbasket belonging to Miss Armitage, and an

easel with painting materials scattered near it.

An unfinished picture was on the easel. He walked up to it—and started. It was a likeness of Sara Trevanion, and he recognised the hand that drew it in the bold masterly conception, the artistic pose.

The colours were raw—the work still crude (Bryan could see where it needed rectifying), but the likeness was so true, so startling, that he passed his hand over his eyes as if he were in a dream.

Was it all a dream, and was that indeed Sara as he knew her once—Sara in her gleaming coquettish beauty—Sara with a smile like a ripple of sunlight, and her strange eyes—half mocking, half sad—Sara with the roses in her cloudy hair, and the flush upon her girlish cheek. He thought that he had forgotten her, but now he knew that every line of her clear-cut face remained engraven indelibly upon his memory. Just as a piece of carving is graven, though a transient covering of whitewash may seem to obliterate it.

Does anyone really forget these things? He saw her like a vision that had been ever before him, as if some cunning necromancer had recalled the haunting features. Would she come in presently and sit down beside him, and listen meekly to his teaching as she had done before?

* * * * *

She came. He started again at the rustle of her drapery. He heard the slow, languid step, the swirl of her long dress, the click of her high-heeled shoes, and turned.

If any one of Bryan Maxwell's friends, supposing him to have known every circumstance of the artist's previous history, could have dreaded a relapse for him—a further succumbing to the fascinations of this woman (more painful, under present circumstances, to his conscientious nature than any form of the original disease), Bryan had never had such a fear for himself. The meeting might not be a pleasant one: it might revive reminiscences which were better closed for ever. But he flat-

tered himself that otherwise it could be of no possible consequence to him.

He had been afraid that it would not be a judicious thing to startle a young girl with such information as he had to bring. Yet the terrible news must be broken to her, and with characteristic self-denial he had not flinched from his task. "The blow," he had thought, "will fall heavily on her, whether she really loved him or not. May God grant her strength to bear it!"

Somehow his prayer seemed to be ill-timed, as he gazed at the woman who was standing before him. His visions were destroyed as by a touch of Ithuriel's spear. The dead past, which had suddenly started into life, was as suddenly dismissed into nothingness.

That was Sara Trevanion on the canvas, warm with life, sparkling with fun—Sara the coquette, the heart-stealer, the witch—Sara with life and hope before her. But this—this woman with the weary, hopeless face, the proud, cold eyes, the scornful lips—who was

she? He could not say that she was less handsome. The nut-brown hair rippled as luxuriantly as ever on the brow. The eyes were as large and clear as they had been before, with a strange gleam in their lustrous depths which he did not like to see. The girlish slenderness had given place to firmer outlines. Her form was no longer lithe as he remembered it, in waving, flower-like litheness, but was hardened into something resembling the rigidity of stone, and the contour of her face was deficient in roundness.

Could he be mistaken? There were the two women. He looked again, with a wistful, pitying look at the woman on the canvas, of infinite beauty, and yet not insipid; capable of love, devotion, and enjoyment in existence, with untold ideal possibilities about her—and then at this other, the reality. A woman weighed down by a sorrow not noble or purifying, with a sense of the loss of something which had marred the lines of her features, and which had left a hardness, a narrowness, instead of the

original harmony—a sharp, sarcastic expression undermining the softness of womanhood, and which would have told the skilful physiognomist of a tragedy concealed beneath the sarcasm.

“It was not Sara,” as he said to himself, “but a mask of the original Sara. She looked as her prototype Eve might have looked after her fall.”

He stood, doubtfully, feeling it as difficult to address her as it might have been to speak to a perfect stranger: the point of continuity had been broken off for ever between their thoughts. She saw his hesitation—saw the bronzed features marked with expressive lines, and noticed the severe gravity of his look and manner. Then, moving slowly towards him, she motioned him with a stiff bow to a chair, and sat down herself.

“You have come to tell me—I have heard your news already.”

Heard his news! And she could sit there as though she were a statue—a machine en-

dowed with life—with no sorrow in the stony eyes, no quiver on the mouth. Merciful heaven! could he ever have loved this woman?

“I don’t understand,” he said with husky slowness—pausing to swallow the lump in his throat. “You cannot have heard what I have to tell you . . .”

“Pardon me, I have heard everything. Dr. Ford did not mean to tell me, I daresay, but there was a little overdone carelessness in his manner, which made me suspect he was hiding something from me, and I begged him to let me hear the worst. I understand that your brother Rosswith Maxwell is dead, and that his death was caused by a wound—a blow given him in some disgraceful quarrel in which he was concerned. You have nothing left to tell me now.”

He sat gazing at her as if her words—her face—her manner had petrified him. He had dreaded the gradual unfolding of his awful secret, the terrible rush of expectation and the calm of intense listening silence, which would

precede his revelation; for he knew that there was nothing so terrible as these prefaces to pain. He had pictured her to himself with her eyes dilated with a nameless horror, and her frame shaken with long quivering moans. And even now he was unable to realize the immensity of the moral chasm which divided her from himself.

Sara's face told nothing of what was passing in her mind. But often as she had thought with a yearning, passionate desire of the possibility of freedom, could she help rejoicing when the door was open, and the way suddenly clear before her? "Thank Heaven," she was saying bitterly in her heart, "that I am saved from the possibility of an awful future!"

Bryan looked at her—at her firmly closed mouth—her determined brow, as she repeated her last words, "You have nothing to tell me," in an unnatural voice, which seemed to be assumed, like everything else about her; and a terrible misgiving crossed his mind. Yet he stared half stupidly, as if his mind refused to

accept the inference to be drawn from this icy indifference. What—she knew that the man was dead, whose wife she had sworn to be in another month—knew that he had died an awful death, suddenly and alone? And yet she spoke—she looked like this. He shook himself as though he would shake off the stupor, and springing up he came and stood over her, scanning her face, as though the fire in his eyes could scorch it into some semblance of life.

“You cannot be a woman to act like this,” he said. “Is it nothing to you that he is dead—*dead!*—this man who was to have been your husband?”

Her eyelids flickered with a shimmer of movement like a ripple on the surface of a stream, and then lowered just a little; and a voluntary mist came before her eyes. A mist, not of tears, but as though the soul had withdrawn into hidden depths, and the eyes were unresponsive of external influences. Coming nearer, he

saw more plainly the thinness of the cheeks, and the lines of weariness about the lips.

"You could promise to be his wife," he continued, "knowing what you did of him. And yet you can fling stones at his memory before he has been dead a day, because of the manner of that death . . . God forgive you! Perhaps Ross was right—poor fellow—it is as well as it is."

She stiffened herself as if for endurance. But it did not escape his notice that the eyes were entirely hidden now under their fringing lashes, and that her hands moved nervously as if feeling for something.

"Knowing what I did of him," she said, repeating his words as if they were part of a catechism, her hands still twitching with nervousness, her lips still tightly drawn, and her eyelids quivering,—“what do you mean?”

Bryan clenched his fingers, thinking of a far-away grave, thinking of the lips that had so often prayed for the man who had died so forsaken.

"Yes, he was right," he muttered, looking sternly at the woman of whom the dead man had truly told him that she had "never loved him." "Which was it," he asked himself, "utter heartlessness, or ineradicable coquetry deep down in the foundations of her nature, that had brought all this terrible ruin upon them?"—one or the other it certainly must have been. "His words were only too true, but then why did you promise to marry him?"

"What do you mean?" she repeated again, looking straight at her inquisitor, and not shrinking from his accusing gaze; but sitting once more rigid and upright, and speaking with a voice which, if it had altered at all, told only of weariness, of dead, dull languor.

"I mean," he said, "that he loved another woman once—a good woman—you knew it. And he left her, as I suppose, to marry you. That you could accept his love, knowing the price of it, was the wonder, the sorrow then, of a man who thought of you, believed in you as he believed in God's truth. The wonder is great-

er than ever now, seeing that you could give no love in return."

Were her pulses stirred at last? Her cheeks suddenly became bloodless, her fingers were unconsciously wrung together. Her bosom heaved, so that he could see the visible movement of her dress.

The lines about her mouth deepened, and told the anguish. But the study of physiognomy is always the most perplexing of problems. And what was it in the face, which was suddenly swept with some volcanic passion, that made the man recoil?

For an instant her white lips moved without uttering a sound. And then she whispered,

"Who believed in me—in *me*—as he believed in God's truth."

"Ay, he did so."

"Who believed in me, yet played at love for me," she continued coolly and scornfully—"who mocked my love—made me a scorn to myself and to others."

"Hold!" he exclaimed almost fiercely, putting

his hand to his head. "These things are of the past—I do not wish to allude to them, further than to ask an explanation of your conduct to my brother. And yet, are you in your right mind? What purpose can you have in these false accusations?"

She answered nothing, but Bryan was conscious of a shudder which passed through her.

He went on.

"Do you pretend that you did not know this man's love for you? Will you tell me you did not all but accept it, even while—Hear me out. He would have left his honour in your hands undoubting, but it was too late—ah—," and he stopped short suddenly with an effort, "as it is too late now. Yet God knows I have wronged no one by these words. Good-bye, Sara."

"Sara!" For the first time and the last. Her dark eyes were dilated now. The tears had been frozen in them long ago, or they would have made a rush to them. As it was, there was a sudden shimmer of feeling, a sudden illumination

of the face, and an unnatural light in the dilated eyes. She tried to answer in a nonchalant manner, but her breath came and went in short quick gasps.

"Tell me the truth—" she exclaimed. "This man . . . loved . . . ?"

He seemed to feel through every word the thrill of her heart, and pitied her for her self-abandonment, knowing what the effort must have cost her.

"*You?*" he said solemnly ; "but that is over. It was due to you to hear an explanation of the past. But the man of whom I spoke buried his dead hope long ago. He scorned his own weakness, and ground the earth down over the grave of that love : it would have taken a miracle to raise it again. He did not deserve that the barren ground should bring forth and blossom again. But God bear him witness—he is thankful that it has done so—he is true to his wife, heart and soul."

"His wife !"

"Yes," he answered, lacking the nerve to

look her in the face as he made the announcement, "the sweetest and tenderest wife that ever man was blessed with. I don't know how to thank God enough for the precious gift He has given me."

She rallied herself instantly, though she felt as if a bombshell had suddenly exploded in their midst. Her head was swimming and her hands were trembling, but she steadied them by an effort.

"I am glad," she said, trying to speak flippantly, "though this same domestic happiness seems to be rather a delusion with most people, and you look graver and sadder than you used to look."

He could not tell from her measured, passionless voice, whether she cared, or whether she did not.

"Yes," he said gravely, "but I am sad at this moment, not for myself, but for you. I will not believe that you are what you seem to be. Won't you say good-bye?" he added, holding out his hand (they had not shaken hands as yet.

He had proffered his, but Sara had determined not to notice it). "Dr. Ford will make all necessary arrangements with you. We shall not meet any more. In my wife's name, God bless you!"

She hesitated, and he did not wait. In another moment she heard the rapid feet dashing down the stairs, and the door closed with a thud that seemed to fall upon her heart.

"Is he gone?—*gone!*" she thought, with one of her sudden impulses. "I had something else to say to him—something to explain." And then, looking with wild eyes on the picture of herself, facing her in ghastly mockery, and clasping her jewelled hands, still adorned with the gifts of the dead, she recognised all the truth. Her fortitude gave way, and she sank back sobbing bitterly.

The reaction came so quickly, that Bryan, while yet on the stairs, heard a smothered cry of anguish, and then—was it the sound of a fall?—he dared not think of it.

"It is too late," she repeated, "even to ex-

plain." "Too late!" She had found out her mistake, and was shocked and startled into real remorse. She knew that somehow it was "her own fault," as she would have found out long before, had she listened to the prophetic warnings of her heart. Bryan's voice haunted her, as it had made her wince in his vehement denunciation. His eyes came before her—deep, reproachful, thoughtful eyes—seeming to search her through and through. She had taunted him with sadness, and yet she knew that there were no lines of peevish disappointment in *his* face—knew that he regarded all painful events as the necessary discipline of life-education. How different from her own irascible temperament, her pride, her sensitiveness to fancied wrongs!

"If I had but waited!" she moaned to herself. But the waste of future which stretched before her, the barren past that lay behind her, echoed only those words, "Too late!" Too late to see through her own vanity and folly.

He had loved her—she knew that this was

true in its highest sense. He had loved her with an unselfish love ; a love that sought her truest welfare. Equally true she knew it to be that he would never care for her any more. Facing this fact, she faced the worst that life could bring to her. She had loved—she did not know how she could ever cease to love—this man, and him only ; but she had loved one thing better—her pride. To have undone herself in ignorance because she was drunk with pride and wounded vanity ; to have flung herself from the high place to which she could never again be lifted ; to have allowed the early faith of her childhood to be impaired by the dreariest scepticism of the cynic ; to have uncrowned her own life, and voluntarily despoiled it of its richest joys ; to have poured out the waste of rich red wine upon the barren ground ; and to have done all this *herself* as no one else could have done it ; were facts which, when thoroughly recognized, threatened to drive her to the very boundaries of sanity. Every faculty seemed to be quickened into preternatural acuteness, that re-

membrance might be more keen, and that she might suffer the more intensely.

In her passionate regret, and hopeless remorse, for the first time she seemed to be seeing plainly; the veils were being torn away which hid her from herself. What had she been? A creature of impulse, a spoiled plaything, a pet of society—a fluttering butterfly, with no higher religion than the unconscious worship of self, forgetting all the sorrows of her fellow-creatures, and all the wonders of creation in her own little pitiful being? And what evil had she caused through this heartless self-idolatry—how terrible easy it had been to light the first spark of it, how impossible to stamp out the devastating flames. She thought of Rosswith, and wished that she had not parted from him in a spirit of resentment: it would have been more comfortable if she had treated him differently, now that she recalled Bryan's words—the words which cut the deepest. But the best drops of her heart's blood would not have availed to help her now. It was well that no one could see

her as she threw herself on the ground, and dashed her head against the wall, feeling that she herself had been accountable for everything that had happened. But pain like this is not necessarily regeneration. We may feel the evil and yet not turn from it. And, in that hour of her bitter self-accusation, Sara never prayed that she might be true to her better self, in the future that lay before her.

She only thought of finding proofs, of testing the truth of Bryan's words. And in the search which was instituted, his letter was found: the letter containing the cheque which Bryan Maxwell had returned to Janet Armitage, and which had lain all this time in a drawer where Sara had tossed it, with other neglected papers at Curzon Street.

CHAPTER X.

ON the evening of the 20th of November, a gentleman sauntered into his club in Pall Mall, and ordered a solitary dinner for himself.

He was a club man without "clubbable" tendencies, who eschewed the society of other habitués, liked to have plenty of space and elbow-room, voted all those who interrupted him "bores," and consoled himself with a book or a newspaper between his fish or his joint.

His place was frequently at the table by the window, where the offensively familiar red-faced and loud-voiced "country member," could not venture to "old fellow" him; where no prosy Pylades could assail him with stale jokes or dry political talk; and no drawling fop could

try to impose upon him by practised airs of fashionable languor.

His habits were so perfectly well understood that he had ceased to attract much attention, and the change in his appearance had been so gradual, that most people would have pronounced him to have worn marvellously well. Yet there were many added lines on the high intellectual forehead, the head was beginning to be crested with a few snowy locks; there were many more crows-feet under the deep-set eyes, and (when no one was obviously observing him) the look about the determined mouth was formidable.

He was silent and absorbed. It was impossible not to perceive that he seemed downcast and weary, and had an odd absent manner. Yet he was surely not a man to whom anyone would have applied for help in an emergency; you would scarcely have desired to place yourself in his power.

"A shrewd fellow—a marvellously clever fellow in his profession," said the bluff country

member, who prided himself on being popular, and liked to hail his friends heartily, or to regale them on bitter ale and sparkling Moselle, "but, bless you, as dried up as a field of stubble, as misanthropical and fastidious as Timon himself. One can't even look at him without thinking of spring guns."

The autumn furlough was over; the winter's toil was before the hard-working lawyer. This perhaps might have accounted for his evident self-absorption, and for the keen interest with which he gazed into the lurid caverns of red coal, as if he saw pictures in them, during the few moments in which the servants were bringing his dinner.

When everything was ready, he suddenly roused himself to the task of eating and drinking, like a man who considered dinner, as a mere matter of business, to be an important item in the day. They brought him his usual half-pint of sherry, and he poured it out at once, handling his wine-glass and gazing at the wine (he was no wine-bibber) as if he were considering

some astute problem. And the waiter, who was accustomed to anticipate his tastes, had to ask him several times what fish he would have, before he awoke to the sense of his desire, to have no fish at all, to avoid the gastronomic delicacies which he said were uneatable, to have a simple mutton chop properly cooked, and to dispose of the ceremony as quickly as possible.

He asked for the papers as a part of the routine. And they brought him the *Times*, the *Standard*, a *Punch*, and *Galignani*.

He turned scornfully over the pages of the uncut *Punch*, and took up the *Times*; he had not seen it before that day. He was not an old Tory of the *pur sang*, but rather an odd mixture of heathenism and Toryism. He hated liberalism of an advanced type, because he was bitter and cynical; and loved to demolish the pleasant appearances of the world, in a merciless unsparing fashion. Time was when he had been enthusiastic himself, but that enthusiasm had gone for ever. Lawrence Routh was now one of the most cautious of politicians. He could sneer at

new changes, because he did not believe in the possibility of their effecting good, but he did not trouble himself to attempt any violent opposition to them.

"I am not young enough," he was accustomed to say, "to be enthusiastic or vehement." And so he contented himself with the pleasant conviction that society was "rotten to the core," and had better be left to its own devices. Had he chosen to give his opinion about it, he would always have been prognosticating the annihilation of our prosperity as a nation.

The dreams that had been his had so thoroughly died out, that it was impossible for him to understand how they had ever existed. Since he ceased to hope better things of Sara Trevanion, and had included all women in the same category with her, he had become a calm and reasonable pessimist—believing to the full extent in the weakness and wickedness of the human heart, and the consequent necessity for human misery; and yet resigning himself to the supposed corrupt and stationary condition of things, with-

out making a single effort to alter it for the better. His mind still worked with intricate machinery, with wheels and counter wheels, ever plotting and dissecting. His cool sagacity, and the never-ending fertility of his mental resources, remained unaltered, with no sign of failure. But since the one precious venture of his lifetime, in which, though the venture had been a secret one, he was yet perfectly aware that he had lost his all, he had been restless and dissatisfied, as he was to-day, caring for nothing as he had done before. Not only restless, but rebelliously antagonistic to the hidden powers which—like a modern Prometheus—he dimly supposed to be inflicting the punishment. He turned the newspaper hastily over, reading it up and down, glancing at the money market, and looking at the price of consols and the events of the day.

“Crime is fearfully on the increase,” he said to himself—“so much for the philanthropist, with his fine talk about moral and intellectual progress. Stuff about compulsory education !

What do they teach the people worth the knowing?—‘only a peck of bread to all that sack.’ The devil, to speak popularly, seems to have taken a new lease of life, and our so-called educational improvements are only helping him forward. . . . So they’ve just discovered, have they, that we’re at the eve of an epoch of peculiar lawlessness, as if we hadn’t long passed the frontiers of that epoch . . . H—m !—the Premier must have his swing, and jerk the reins of his authority, it seems, in supreme contempt for the feelings of the great bulk of the nation. Best so, perhaps, if one could depend on him, after all.”

He put the paper down absently, continuing his reflections.

If his only remaining theory for the reconstruction of society could possibly have been carried out, he would have chosen to deal with men as if they had neither soul nor sentiment. If the so-called “lower orders” had been made of stuff absolutely passive and insensible, his system of riding roughshod over the feelings

and opinions of the many might have succeeded better in practice. But as it was, he began to despair over the revolutionary times. A foreign paper might be more enlivening. He lifted the *Galignani*. His eyes ran over the list of deaths. —There was a crash, only a mild one, but the decanter had gone over, and the wine was dripping on the floor. Busy waiters hastened to wipe it up. And the gentleman stood, clutching the unconscious paper with a face as white as its pages. His appearance attracted attention, but he rallied himself instantly, and returned the looks which were directed at him with interest. The broken glass was taken away, and he sat down as if nothing had happened, drawing a long deep breath, and glancing again at an entry in the paper.

An entry which (Anglicised) ran thus :—

“On the 20th inst., the result of an accident, Rosswith Maxwell, of ‘The Towers,’ —shire, England. Age 33.”

Are not some sudden answers to impious prayers, or wishes, which are morally the same,

thrust in our faces like "gauntlets with a gift in them?"

What had this well-bred gentleman, ~~this~~ respected and honourable man, done that his lips should blanch and his hands grow unsteady at the mere sight of the registered death of the man of all men whom most he had wished out of the way?

Well, what of that? He had not helped him out of the way? Certainly he had not given him any assistance on the road of life; maybe he had gone a little farther, and given him a little less than no assistance. But what of that also? Were not such things done every day? and had not that man been his rival—his successful, hated rival? Why should he have given him good advice, or have introduced him to better friends?

Certainly, now that all was past and gone, the retrospect was a little painful and humiliating. Rosswith's story seemed to be one more added to the skeletons which were mouldering away out of sight in the past life of

Lawrence Routh, as such skeletons do moulder in the lives of most of us. He remembered him in all the excesses of his roystering boyhood, when he was being drawn into the leash of various temptations; and remembered him also when he had been going, as he said, "at a railroad speed to the bad," and when he would not put forward a little finger to deter him. Had he not, as he now remembered, recommended Homburg or Baden to Janet Armitage, with a faint hope that something might happen at one or other of those places which would open the eyes of Sara Trevanion? Well, and was he not perfectly justified in such a hope? The paper simply said an accident. Rosswith Maxwell might have been upset in a carriage—might have been drowned—might have fallen from a height. There were a hundred ways in which a man might be accidentally killed. And was it his fault that the dead man happened to be a black-guard?

It was a bad business, but, according to his creed, Rosswith Maxwell must either have been a

rogue or a simpleton. For he had "no brains"—nobody ever had any brains, according to Lawrence Routh; cretinism seemed to be an universal affliction—such a fellow could not have succeeded in anything.

So Lawrence Routh reasoned for an hour. But after all his casuistry, the fact remained unaltered. This man had been his hated rival. He had wished him dead a hundred times, and he was—dead.

It came upon him like a decree of fate, crushing out the power of his individual will. Latterly he had feared that the game had ended, and he had drawn nothing but blanks in it. There had been something worse, infinitely worse, for him in that fear, than mere corporeal loneliness. He had no plans, or projects to discuss, for the future stretched before him arid and barren. Life seemed to be a passionless mystery. And yet he had continued to think on the subject, unweariedly and tenaciously; he had continued to prepare for any unforeseen contingency. How was that now, when the trumps had fallen

to his share, he seemed to be so used to dealing with insignificant bits of pasteboard, that his hand began to falter and to shake? Had his iron resolution suddenly deserted him?

"I must go to poor Sara at once," he said to himself, and then caught back the expression impatiently. "Why should I say 'poor?'" She never made a pretence of caring for him. She is young, healthy, rich, and handsome, with all her life before her, and yet I call her 'poor.' I am becoming a fool myself."

If the most painful things in life have a flavour of bitterness in them, the reverse of the axiom is sometimes equally true. Lawrence Routh left England the next day. He was nearer than he had ever been before to the attainment of the one object of his life, and he knew it. But, looking on his face, you would hardly have thought it had been so. The granted desire, as it often happens with us, was not granted in exactly the form he had wished for it. Perhaps he dreaded coming into fierce collision with Sara's altered temperament, since he was not the man to stoop

were satisfied which had been made upon it. Harpies and vultures flocked from all directions, till Bryan's heart began to fail him for the very existence of his patrimony. Long ago he had foreseen that the world of luxury could never be for him; but he was uncomfortably conscious that men pitied him when he had to part with much of his land, and that many eyes were watching curiously to see what plan could be successfully adopted for his future. Bryan did not know himself. He was coming to Collingford the better to see his way. His position was a false one, though it was none of his making, and he painfully felt being thrust into it.

It was a beautiful evening in May when the artist and his wife drove to "The Towers," from Collingford Station. They had been installed, during the intervening months, in London, in a tiny "box" near one of the Parks, a wee bird's nest of a place, which they might have been able to keep up on £400 a year. A good deal that was painful had been involved in despoiling the little nest of its various household gods, but

Bryan had ceased to dread any trifling vexations for Charley. Charley Maxwell had proved to be like one of the plants that thrive best in sunshine, or one of the fruits which mellow suddenly in rare warm weather:

When Bryan had known her first he had seen her in the worst possible phase of her character, when she had been a sort of moral aberration of herself, shutting herself up from all healthful influences, and living in a state of constant repression. But that which sorrow could not do for her, happiness was already doing.

Not that the sunshine was all unclouded. Bryan's health was evidently not strong, but this cause for anxiety only made Charley thankful that the marriage had been hurried. Womanlike, she never troubled herself about pecuniary considerations; and the experience of suffering in her past existence only made her more thankful for the happiness of the present. Her trustful affection for her husband had borne the test of almost entire

seclusion ; but no disillusion had come to her through sole dependence on his society. She was waking up suddenly to an enthusiasm for life—an enthusiasm in which it seemed to her as if all that she had lately called existence were unworthy of the name.

There is more of prose, and also a good deal more of earnest solemn poetry, in married life than is generally imagined. Poetry which is not evident to ordinary observers, but which is silent, like the river widening and deepening as it flows. Charley had been prepared for the prose. A more exigeante woman might have tormented her husband with useless enquiries about the past ; but her confidence in Bryan made her content with facing the present, with an earnest determination to help and influence. The certainty that she knew all, made her incredulous of evil. And she was not so unreasonable as to expect Bryan to forget. On the contrary, she had memories herself of which she could not have spoken ; and from her own experience she knew and accepted the fact, that

the more expansive the heart is, the more tenacious are all its memories.

Some of these memories came back to her mind, as they drove from Collingford Station—which was some distance from the village—through scenery that was radiant in its first spring glory. The brown moors which were diversified in summer and autumn with stretches of broom and breckan, were already golden with furze, and were mellowed by the evening skies as if with a sign of coming life. These were succeeded by lanes adorned with pale-faced primroses, and blue foregrounds of hyacinth, whilst they were still whitened here and there with hawthorn blossoms, as if they had been touched with hoar-frost.

Bryan was unusually silent, hiding his emotion under an appearance of calmness, and only trusting himself to speak a word or two at a time; and Charley remembered that this coming back to the home of his childhood would be an unusual ordeal to him.

He leant heavily on the carriage door, and

treated a little sister as they entered the Park. The gates of the avenue had been carelessly left open so that plants in rank growth had crept over the mowed lawn, and ivy was torn off in dragged confusion as the master ordered them to be closed.

"The back entrance has been used," he tried to explain to Charley, "but I should like everything to be done now, as much as possible, in due form."

They drove in, and even Charley was conscious of a chill. The place had a neglected look, as it had been in Chancery. The carriage sweep was overgrown with grass and straggling weeds. The first flowerbeds which met the eye had not been touched in the great uprising of Mother Nature, who had adorned them lavishly with a profusion of wild morning-glories, thick and green, and a few scraggy specimens of Solomon's seal. But the garden flowers which had been planted in Charlie Maxwell's time had almost disappeared: even the rhododendrons bore little bloom. The hedge was untrimmed and damp with broken window-panes.

"That will be a question for us to consider. I think we can well dispense with it, and have it pulled down," said Bryan, in answer to an inquiring glance from his wife.

"Is there no one here to meet you?" she asked, the words escaping from her involuntarily. "Why, even in the village of Collingford some of the cottagers stood at their doors."

"Yes," said her husband, bitterly; "and did you not notice that one of the honest fellows tried to get up a feeble cheer, which met with no response from any of the rest. They have little reason to welcome a Maxwell."

Charley made no answer. The grey old building was now visible through the avenue, lit up by the same luminous haze which bathed the landscape in the distance; bands of clouds of varied colour and cirrous streaks of silver could be seen between the branches of the elms; while the setting sun, which was illuminating everything with its glory, streamed upon their moss-grown trunks, and fell, with fainter radiance, upon the pale cheeks of the new Squire.

The sunburnt hue had passed away, and Bryan was now very pale—paler than Charley cared to see him.

His eyes were fixed on the vista before them formed by the break of the well-remembered trees. The arched aisles of giant elms, diversified by an occasional beech, whose hoary trunks were gnarled and lichened here and there with age, and the fresh green of the grass,—though the former might be unpruned, and the latter unmowed—looked at least calm and serene. Serene as Bryan had often seen them in his dreams, when in fancy he had wandered amongst the shady nooks and pleasant hollows of the well-known park. Far away was the distant gleam of the water, but nearer were the old turrets of the family house, and vistas of opening green leaves melting into purple against the branches. It was a scene to have made the heart of the owner exult, had it not been for the associations of the place. All this was his; but how heavily encumbered, with what miserable remembrances, and under what

terrible obligations! Why had the burden been lain upon him? For what mysterious reason must he be forced to take up his residence in a place where the atmosphere seemed to be saturated with everything which was likely to produce morbid mental conditions?

Bryan pressed his wife's hand, and shrank back in the carriage, unable to speak.

Charley too was trembling with agitation—an agitation which she firmly repressed as she lovingly returned the pressure, and watched—not the prospect before her, but that gleam of golden light from the setting sun, which revealed only too plainly every hollow and line in the sorrowful face by her side. To natures like Charley's, which invest themselves as with a garment in the well-being of others, earthly love comes as the strongest incentive to renewed efforts after purity, self-denial, and progress in well-doing. It was her firm belief in the old romantic ideal (an ideal that cannot perish, because it is based upon truth) which made her strive to realize it to the utmost.

But it was necessary for a love like hers to germinate from respect; and it was part and parcel of it now that she should see no defect even of transient weakness in Bryan, but that she should look upon this morbid dread which he seemed to have of the future in its true light, as the feebleness caused by an oversensitive spirit, acting upon an organization already weakened by illness.

"I cannot bear it," he muttered, speaking more to himself than to her; "I shall never get over the associations of the place. I believe I must give it up—I shan't be able to live here."

There was a beautiful humility about the little wife's idea of her relationship to him—a humility which is rather out of fashion in the present day, but which is by no means incompatible with some of the rarest qualities of mind. To undervalue herself, and to give reverence to another, came as naturally to her as her modest avowals of love, and her childlike confessions of happiness; so that it cost her something to

take the lead even for an instant, to break through her habitual reticence, and to set herself to destroy the spell of melancholy which she feared might overcome her husband at this crisis.

"Forgetting those things which are behind," she murmured, "whether they refer to other people or to ourselves, let us press forward from to-day . . . Dear, what can it matter to you what others have done? Is it not weak to let yourself brood over a fancied inheritance of wrong, when vigorous and determined efforts are needed for the future. My husband, my darling, of whom I am so proud, I want you to banish these cares and remembrances. Not recklessly, but with the true manliness which has always been yours. Let this day mark a new era in our lives."

She did not think she had spoken with much effect, but her gentle pathetic voice stirred the manhood in him like a strain of martial music. The voice seemed changed, the melodious intonation in it was so entirely new. Charley's hand still

lay nestling in her husband's, confidently, as if to give him courage. And when she looked up at him with her trustful face, and great noble eyes, free from any low or base thought, those eyes seemed to him to be resplendent with a light not of this world. A thrill of tender feeling came over him. He raised the little hand to his lips and kissed it. No other words were spoken between them, but it was as if their new home had been solemnly consecrated, and as if a new contract had been sealed between them.

CHAPTER XII.

BY the middle of the following day Charley had explored every nook and cranny in the strange old house. She was enchanted with the stateliness of the place, with the old helmets, and breast-plates, foxes' heads, and stags' antlers, which, besides the oak carving, ornamented the hall. Her fancy was especially taken with the dining-room. She was delighted with the ancient chimney-piece (which Hulbert Maxwell had restored), with the antique devices on its mantel-shelf, and logs of firewood crackling underneath. Bryan had humoured her delight in these out-of-the-way things.

"Let's have the genuine Yule log," he said, directly they arrived. "The evening is cold enough in all conscience, though it is not Christ-

mas time. The place will be better for a thorough warming."

And by the light of the crackling flames Charley gazed at the pictures, and would not listen to Bryan when he tried to shake her faith in them. She thought of the dead young beauties who had sat for those portraits, lavishing smiles around them, and then fell into a reverie respecting the past and the future.

Presently an old woman, to whom Bryan had been kind in his boyhood, and who had taken the place of housekeeper on moderate wages, showed her young mistress in due form to her bed-room. A bed-room which Charley would have thought charming in the days of her girlhood. It was low-pitched, with quaint nooks, oak panelling, and wide window-seats; and was filled with picturesque furniture, and tapestry hangings. Charley put down the candle, and fell into another reverie, which had more to do with Bryan than with the quaint things around her. But when suddenly there was a movement in the tapestry behind her (a

rustling caused by the wind), the blood began to creep in her veins. She thought of all the people who had lived and died in that house, and dead hands seemed to be stretched to her from the mysterious drapery. She seemed to hear the tread of feet that had long been confined in the churchyard sod, and strange eyes seemed to look at her from the old-fashioned looking-glass.

"I won't tell Bryan what a goose I am," she said sturdily to herself, trying to still the fluttering of her heart. "I must get used to every nook and corner of this strange old place. I must familiarise myself with it, and then perhaps I shan't mind it."

And when the morning came she began to explore.

The result was not altogether satisfactory. Certainly she was in ecstasies of admiration at the carved balustrades on the oak staircase, and was half surprised and half frightened by the daggers and rusty swords which, to satisfy a whim of his, Hulbert Maxwell had stored up in

the corridors. But looking at things from a housekeeping point of view, they began to assume a serious aspect.

Rosswith had never spent a farthing on repairs, and the woman who had been left in charge of the house in his absence had managed to repay herself by a system of pilfering, so that everything had been allowed to go to rack and ruin. Charley found a bake-house and a brew-house stopped up with lumber, an old-fashioned kitchen which had been deserted for nearly a year, and which was said to be overrun with blackbeetles and rats; whilst the sight of the drawing-room gave her a positive shock. Everything about it was tawdry and faded. The ormolu looking-glasses were tarnished from exposure to damp; so were the gilded cornices. The amber-satin chairs were discoloured; the tiger and fox skins on the oak flooring were moth-eaten in places; everything wore a look of melancholy, of poverty, and of neglect.

She shut the door in a hurry, and returned to consult very seriously with Bryan.

“It would be very splendid if it were not

so deserted—so worn,” she said, disconsolately.

“I don’t want it to be splendid,” he answered.

“It is the only part of the house which is said to date from the Tudor period. Whether it does so or not (and I have my doubts about it), it only reminds one of the old reprobates who used to haunt those rooms.” And, seeing her look surprised, he continued, “It would require no end of money to put the house to rights. But, Charley, we must not spend even what is left to us. I have first to pay my brother’s debts, and then to pay my own.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, widening her brown eyes. “You who have always been so careful to owe no one a farthing; how can you have debts? Why didn’t you tell me of them?”

“The accumulated debt,” he answered, “falls heavily on me—the neglect of centuries—the grinding misery which has been inflicted on the poor. Pay it, did I say? The little that I can do will be the merest drop in the bucket. Still we mustn’t lose heart; you yourself preached courage. We have a difficult task before us;

but I have *you* to help me with it. We can't expect to have everything bright." And he stopped, murmuring Goethe's words to himself, "Wo viel Licht ist, ist starker Schatten."

"Yes, Bryan," she said, catching fresh enthusiasm from him, "you are quite mistaken if you think I want everything to go straight. But I am only rather puzzled. What is to be done with this great place on our hands? It is funny to inherit a thing of this kind, and yet to be so poor you don't know what to do with it."

"To have antiquarians taking an interest in our stone-mullioned windows, and yet not to be able to pay servants to sweep the dust from our floors. Well, there *is* something comical in it, when one comes to think of it; but at any rate we are saved from the feeling of satiety which philosophers tell us results from being over-rich. What shall we do? Shall we sell the old oak carvings, and have people cry shame on us? There is another plan for the present," he said, trying to speak unconcernedly, and yet feeling a little nervous about propound-

ing his project. "What do you think of shutting up one wing of the house? The other rooms will be sufficient—more than sufficient for our wants. Two I propose to reserve empty, that I may use them as studios. We can choose the best of the old furniture, and sell off some of the rest. The outhouses must be cleared—they are in tolerable repair; and we must do our own baking and washing in primitive fashion at home. All the cooking, I should think, could be managed as it is, without the larger kitchen being taken into use.

She was standing before him with clasped hands, and a responsive glow in her dark eyes.

"Yes, yes," she said eagerly, her nervousness conquering her bravery. "Oh! Bryan, *do* shut it up. I didn't like to tell you before, but the meaningless grandeur of it oppresses me a little. I think of all the old stories which the people tell about it. If it were full of company and servants it would be another thing, but as it is I agree with you, we are better without it. But of course you will merely amuse yourself with

painting; you won't work any more—you are not strong enough?"

"Why not work any more, pragmatical wife? I shouldn't be happy without work. It is my natural element. I don't feel as if I can die till I have paid off poor Ross's debts. I can't be too thankful to have some means of paying them."

"I wish you wouldn't use such vehement language; it isn't like you," she said, with a trembling lip; "it is too strong for the occasion. What *has* it to do with dying? I can't bear to hear you talk so. And as to being idle, you have other natural duties; you mustn't shut yourself out from your position in the county."

"No," he said gently, "I have considered all that. My position is the very thing I mean to face."

CHAPTER XIII.

IT was soon clear to others besides himself that Bryan Maxwell meant to face his position.

One of his first steps towards facing it was to send for the man who had acted as steward to his brother Rosswith, but who had taken care to do nothing without payment in the six months which had intervened, and consult him as to the possibility of raising ready money.

Mr. Crawford's account was not enlivening. Some of the best of the timber had already been sold on the estate, and had not fetched so much as had been expected. Various articles of plate, &c., with which Bryan had been familiar from boyhood, were missing; and the man acknowledged to having been cognizant of the fact that

the most valuable heirlooms belonging to the property had been sold by the late owner, to meet pressing emergencies. He was ready to produce proofs of the sale ; but Bryan, who had no reason to doubt his assertion, and who had anticipated the possibility of his brother having made away with a good deal of the old-fashioned plate and jewelry, deferred the matter to another time, and proceeded with the business he had in hand.

"There is the land," he said, as if speaking to himself ; "could not more be made of the land ?"

"It's foul stuff, most of it," answered the man. "Scarcely an acre in it worth anything! We managed it as well as we could, but the worst of it is the backwardness of the tenants. We've done our best to force in the rents."

"Disregarding the circumstances. Forgetting that the very cottages, for which you would enforce payment, may breed pestilence and death—I have no doubt of it," said Bryan hurriedly, while his face darkened.

The steward saw that something was amiss, and hastened to exculpate himself.

"I assure you, sir," he repeated, "we have done our best. But the ingratitude of the poor is amazing—positively amazing. You'll find we've had much to contend with here—such duplicity, and so much beer-drinking."

"A nice state of things, isn't it?" muttered Bryan; and then he continued aloud, in a rapid dissatisfied voice, "Did it never strike you that some example must be set to people of this sort, before one has a right to complain of their conduct?—that the untrained instincts of the many, in most cases, wait for the guidance of the cultivated few?"

Mr. Crawford was far from taking in the meaning of these responses, but they began to take effect on him. He rubbed his hands apologetically together, murmuring something about his "willingness to carry out Mr. Maxwell's wishes."

"I shall trouble no one to carry out my wishes. I mean to be my own steward," an-

answered Bryan, irritably. "The real fact is, I cannot afford to pay for help."

"I am afraid you will only meet with disappointment. We did our best, sir," said the man, still endeavouring to speak politely, but with an ironical smile, which he in vain attempted to keep back, overspreading his features. "The cottages are out of repair, and people are ready to talk."

Bryan did not clearly hear what he said. He sat leaning his elbows on the table, and resting his head upon his hands, deep in thought.

"The matter will require careful consideration," he said, crossing himself from his reverend after an interval. "I will send for you again when I want to know everything that is necessary about the roads, and other matters soon. But I intend to do nothing in a hurry. And you will be well paid for my trouble which I may give you in reaching me to, and to make a conclusion."

The ~~ex-archbishop~~ ~~archbishop~~ himself now is ready to

indulge in a downright laugh at the expense of the new Squire, and left "The Towers"—not in the best of humours—to spread an exaggerated account through the neighbourhood of Mr. Maxwell's "ways," pronouncing him to be an "uncommon queer party." An account which was all the more readily received, since the Maxwells, as a family, were said to have what is popularly called a "bee in their bonnets."

"Had not the last Maxwell gone in for horse-racin' and gamblin' with a lot of them furriners in Germany?" Was it not a logical inference that this painter brother should be worse and not better than the late owner of the property, who, at any rate, lived like a gentleman? So it soon began to be rumoured about amongst those who are always ready to stigmatise any unusual mental or moral condition in their neighbours, which they cannot explain by a "ready nomenclature," that the pride, temper, or obstinacy of his ancestors, had culminated in Bryan Maxwell, in one of the strangest phases of what they chose to term "eccentricity."

CHAPTER XIV.

WHETHER the new Squire was "eccentric" or not, it is certain that he was exceedingly depressed after he had parted with Crawford.

He tried to keep up appearances with Charley, but things began to wear an ominous aspect.

He had his plans—humanitarian ones—which would have seemed to the steward, who had practised the old methods of enforcing rents and beating down the tenants, unpractical and absurd. He had his own systems of farming, probably destined in the long run to supplant the older ones, of which Mr. Crawford had been the embodiment. He had thoroughly studied these questions in the interval since Rosswith's death. But none of his new ideas could be

carried out without funds. And every day it seemed to be more and more impossible for him to attempt to raise the necessary money.

“There were the pictures, to be sure,” he reflected—“family pictures,” as his father had called them. He had no scruples of conscience about parting with these, and they might sell for something, though that something would be a woful come-down from the sum at which Hulbert Maxwell had appraised them. The greater bulk of them was utter rubbish, but the few true Reynolds’s, Lawrence’s, &c., ought to fetch their proper market value. There was the furniture, which he might part with by auction, but he shrank from the thought of it, every article in the house seeming to tell a story. And there were the various Lares and Penates which his brother had spared,—the inlaid marble table, and art treasures from Italy. He might also sell these at a great disadvantage; but what, after all, would the sacrifice avail him?

Rumours, as he well knew, were already

afloat that the last remnants of the old manor were certainly doomed, and could he hope finally to avert that doom? The dismissal of the steward had been taken as a bad omen, and a demand, not couched in the most polite language, from the principal mortgagee was already reducing him to the borders of despair.

Things wore this ominous aspect when one morning, returning from a visit to Collingford, Bryan was greeted by the information that a visitor had arrived by an early train from London, and was waiting in the little breakfast-room to see him.

"I suppose it is one of your artist-friends, judging from appearances," said Charley, bridling with something of the old manner which had occasionally distinguished her in the days when Sara called her "a little prig." "I can't say much for his breeding—he is too free-and-easy. You are not the least like an artist yourself, you know, Bryan."

Her husband looked at her in some surprise, being far from guessing the explanation—how

the "artist-friend," meeting Mrs. Maxwell in her straw hat and gardening gloves, had coolly taken the little face between his big hands, examining it critically, and ending by kissing it.

"I was your husband's father," he explained, "before you were heard of." But Charley's nerves had not yet recovered from the shock.

Bryan made his way into the breakfast-room in some bewilderment, and understood the matter at once when he saw a carelessly-dressed, square-built, peaked-bearded man settled comfortably at the table, and chipping an egg.

"So you are put on your half-rations already. An unfortunate thing for me, for I'm as hungry as a trooper," said Dillon, "continuing his task, without looking up.

"It is kind of you to come," said Bryan warmly. "How could they give you such a meagre fare?"

"Fact is, I scared that wife of yours off like a hunted hare. I never shall be anything but a blundering idiot. Tell you what, Maxwell,

you're a precious lucky fellow—you've won the trumps after all, that you have, my boy. She minds me of those lines of Browning's (I beg pardon, the wife's, it's all the same, you know), 'sweetest eyes were ever seen,' and a face as tender and true, my lad, as ever looked on mortal man. Don't thank me for coming down to see you—I'd have come a longer distance to catch a sight of that child. By-the-by, of course you know she's got a marvellous look of the woman in Millais' 'Huguenots'?"

Bryan smiled. Dillon's garrulity invariably made him silent:

"You heard I was driven into a corner," he said presently, "and so you have come to encourage me with your sympathy. Thank Heaven I have some true friends left! I might have known you would come."

"Never heard of anyone so easily humbugged in my life," said Dillon, with his mouth full, and shaking with inward laughter. "As if you didn't know that selfishness was one of my most striking characteristics. As if I ever lost the

opportunity of bagging a rich prize when there was one to be bagged."

Bryan waited; he knew his friend too well to waste breath in interrupting him.

"Trust me for being up to all the art gossip afloat. As if I hadn't heard that somebody's new picture, whenever it is painted, will be worth a sack of tin in the market! Everybody's on the *qui vive* about it—it's just a piece of good luck, for things have been horribly flat of late, and there's a want of some new sensation. There's a sort of dramatic interest in the whole affair, you see; you managed things uncommonly well, after all. There's nothing like retiring from the world, and getting up a mystery, like a valetudinary Timon, for making the public take an interest in you. Now I tell you what," said he, suddenly twisting round, and looking keenly at Bryan, "you must let me go halves. I've got the first start, and I want to be beforehand with those rascally dealers, ye see. I'll make a bargain with ye. Suppose I advance you £500, or I'd rather say £1000 at once, on

your next picture—you shall paint me two while you're about it, if you're squeamish about the money—I'll help you to farm what remains of the Collingford estate; and if you carry out the new improvements which you consulted me about, you'll be able to double that sum by the end of the year. The property has been so atrociously mismanaged, that I shall be greatly surprised if you don't find the produce repay you fourfold, when once you take the matter up and give it a fair chance."

The shadow which had been settling on Bryan's face cleared a little.

"A thousand pounds!" he said, shrinking back with a doubtful smile. "It's something to find one has such disinterested friends. But you mustn't forget I have managed to save a little during the last few months."

"Preposterous humbug!" cried Dillon, losing his patience; "you know your position here is a sort of social paradox—an absurd anomaly. I put it in plain terms. You know you can scarcely make that little wife of yours understand how you're hampered at every turn by the

consequences of other people's sins . . . Tell me that a man of your refinement doesn't feel it, and yet that you don't stick to the old place as if you were a limpet, and that you haven't an absurd idea as if it would be treason to your race to sell it! You can't bamboozle me. Tell you what, Maxwell, you'll want £5,000 instead of £1,000 before the matter's finished; and you shall have it, too, and welcome. I couldn't have a better investment. But I'll humour that pride of yours, which is one of the seven deadly sins; I won't part with a farthing unless you give me an equivalent for my money."

And getting up in a rage, he began to pace the room.

"Do you think I could take such a paltry advantage of your good-nature?" began Bryan, in a choking voice.

"Come, come, you'll hurt my feelings. So you refuse to give me a fair chance of a capital speculation, do you? Boy, it's unfriendly—I didn't expect it of ye. Do you forget that I am a childless man—that none will ever inherit my money? Do you suppose I am without hu-

man sympathies? There was a time when I too dreamt of a little representative on earth of a better place above, which might have strengthened my shaky faith in all the tall talk about a more enduring home. Do you think you are to keep all the sentiment to yourself? Hang it, it's like your insolence! *Anch'io son pittore.*"

And Dillon broke off with that tendency to stammer which he showed, in common with Charles Lamb, when the true self came uppermost, which most Englishmen try to hide. In a minute he had recovered himself, and with the keen appreciation of the absurd intermixture between the sublime and the ridiculous in life which was a part of his nature, he assumed an air of tragi-comedy, and set his back against the door with a vehemence which made Bryan tremble for the security of the woodwork.

"Humph! I thought you had no nerves. You give a start at the slightest racket. That comes of the half rations.—Now I have you on the weak side. Try to pass me before you have promised to consent to my terms, and I'll make

a scene which will frighten that young wife of yours into hysterics, and I've known young wives die for less catastrophes than that A wilful man will have his own way, if he has to fight for it, and send his better half into fits, I suppose. But as to quieter modes of warfare, I know my own interests a great deal too well for you to attempt to argue me out of them."

"For Charley's sake, then, I will accept the loan of money," said Bryan, smiling and holding out his hand. "But if I were not hopeful of making a competency in time, I am afraid I should still be inclined to reject it. You may call it false pride or not, but I have no fancy for getting into debt."

CHAPTER XV.

IN a very short time after this conversation great changes were made at "The Towers." Carpenters and bricklayers were employed, and that portion of the house which was destined for use was put into thorough repair. The grounds were neatly if not extravagantly kept, and the dead leaves were always swept from the avenue. The grey-headed cook and house-keeper, who remained at the old house, managed everything with propriety under the guidance of her young mistress. Popular opinion, which is proverbially variable—impressed by the appearance of scaffolding and paint, and by the men in whitey-brown coats who were suddenly seen in the old avenue—veered to the conviction that the new Squire, after all, must be "pretty well-to-do."

But it was thought a little inconsistent with this theory that Mr. Maxwell should be always unattended when he was seen abroad. He had evidently no pride in the "old blood," which had asserted itself in his predecessors by extravagant propensities for the hunting-field or the race-course; yet one of the stables had certainly been put in order, a horse had been bought which was reported to be a cheap one, and it was taken as another sign of the artist's "quareness" that he manifested a predilection for long solitary rides. The Collingford gossips began to whisper that his health was precarious. "Just look at him," they said, "he was not like other folk." His manners were more dignified than they had been in his earlier years, his step was more firm and decisive. But they were keen enough to find out that his voice was a little melancholy, yet with something of its former mellowness lingering in its tones. Some said that he was "sadly changed." They missed the old ruddy, vigorous appearance, and the look of vital energy which had

animated him in youth. Bryan did not impress his bucolic neighbours favourably. And when it was discovered that he had suddenly reduced his establishment, shutting himself up from the society of the neighbouring gentlefolk, who were beginning to show some eagerness to welcome him into their circle, the eccentricity of Mr. Maxwell was considered to be established beyond a doubt.

Some of the gentry in the neighbourhood agreed with the village gossips. It was a "positive shame," they said, "for the Maxwells to keep no dinner company, when they had that fine old dining-room, which in Hulbert Maxwell's time had so often resounded with feasting and merriment."

"The lawn," they thought, "was just made for croquet parties," (croquet was then for the first time coming into vogue), and "there were no better dancing-rooms in all the county."

But Bryan was firm. He was clear on one point—that his first duty was to discharge his debt to Frank Dillon, and afterwards to make

restitution in the name of his dead brother. His first object was earnestly to pursue his profession, and to pursue it in a manner that he had never done before, with the main object of making it as lucrative as possible. Visiting of any sort seemed to be incompatible with such duties.

"Why," he asked his wife, "should we fritter away our energies in making the acquaintance of people for whom we care nothing? I have had enough of the world. I want to secure time for work. I want to be with you —with *you* alone, in quiet." This longing for quietude was gaining upon him.

"But you know what Mr. Dillon said about it. He wanted you to take your proper place amongst men. He asked me to use my influence to have you appreciated as you deserve. Don't you think it would be a little ungrateful to disappoint him? Would it not be selfish for us to forget your possible influence in the future? Your position, as one of the leading men in the county, has its responsibilities," pleaded the little wife, for the first time anxious about such things

from pride in her husband. She was going on to speak of a pet scheme of her own (Frank Dillon, who had been ready with the money, had first put it into her head), a possible Parliamentary career for him in the future, but something in Bryan's face stopped her.

"I am sure you will be very unpopular," she faltered. "I shall not like to hear people speak against you ; it will be hard for me to bear."

"Unpopular with whom ?" he asked, relaxing into a smile. "Do you mean with the poor or with the rich ? The poor will like us all the better because we *are* poor. It is a fact, whether we choose to deny it or not, that the poor seldom see a man loaded with worldly goods without owing him a secret grudge. For the work I have to do with them I am better as I am."

"I did not mean with the poor. I meant with your equals," faltered Charley, unable to find the flaw in her husband's logic.

"With my equals. Yes, if I deserve it," he answered, still with the same smile. "Charley, don't you run away with the mistaken idea that

any effort to do our duty *must* tend to persecution. The very cry which is so often quoted, 'Crucify Him, Crucify Him,' was wrung in a moment of excitement from poor misguided people. Remember how they followed Him, how they shouted His applause. They knew not what they did. And if we come to descend to our poor efforts to do right, that which is 'acceptable with God,' is often 'approved of men.' And if not, what can it matter? It is generally the very smallest intellects which peck hungrily at the reputation of others."

He dropped his voice, as if conscious of touching on subjects on which he did not often speak. He lived these things, instead of talking much about them. But Charley was silenced. And if the strictures which she dreaded were made on the unsocial conduct of the new-comers, none of them reached the couple at "The Towers," whose whole interest at this period was absorbed in selecting a proper studio for Bryan. Great consultations were held upon the matter. The old billiard-room, which had the advantage of being arched

with a dome of glass, was at first selected. But, as Charley declared, it was "much too large." It would be too cold in winter, and would require too much money to keep it in thorough repair. There was a smaller room, also roofed with glass, which could be made a cozy habitat; where Bryan could paint his pictures, and Charley could take her needlework. This was the octagon room, which, in the time of Bryan's childhood, had been adorned with hot-house flowers, and constantly used as a boudoir by his mother—a consideration which decided them in finally selecting it.

Already, as Frank Dillon had said, it had been whispered in the Art circles of London that Bryan Maxwell intended to resume his beloved vocation; that his energy and genius had apparently returned to him, and that he was likely to make large sums of money by some of his new pictures; but when this piece of news became an established fact, and began to be noised about at Collingford, the curiosity that was shown on the subject became unbounded.

The idea of a real live painter "takin' notes" in their neighbourhood, a painter who was an amateur farmer to boot, and who was already carrying out his newfangled notions about the cottage-gardens and crops, tickled the fancy of those old-fashioned, steady-going neighbours who owned the various parks and country houses which were scattered about within twenty miles of the estate. Mr. Maxwell was pronounced to be a Radical of the most thorough-going school. Could further proof be wanting of his enormities in the way of innovation than the fact of his condescending to a form of trade, and being forced to "buckle down" to rich Liverpool and Manchester patrons, who made havoc with their h's, and profaned the precincts of "The Towers."

Yet it was said that he had genius, that he might make the name of Maxwell famous, and hand it down to posterity, when the idle autocrats who had been his ancestors were forgotten in their graves. The county didn't know what to make of it, but decided wisely, considering the circumstances, in suspending its judgment,

and waiting to see whether the delinquent would be successful.

Meanwhile Bryan was far from sharing in the brilliant prognostications which some of the more good-natured of the newspaper critics were already hazarding concerning his future.

It seemed to him a little hard always to have to paint for money, and to be able to attempt nothing in which he could hope to do himself justice. There was something painful in unpacking and tossing over the unfinished fragments of pictures which he had brought with him from London. He turned away with a sigh from sketches full of promise, that had never been completed—the wasted labour of years, which had accumulated like *débris* waiting for the moulder's hand.

The fact was, as he tried to explain to Charley, that in the earlier part of his career as a painter, the very keenness of his pursuit after beauty and truth in their different manifestations, had left him little time to gather up and embody his ideas in a more lasting form.

“And now,” he said, “I have lost the power. What a dreamer I have been! I can never now hope to accomplish the *magnum opus* of my ideal life.”

“No,” said Charley eagerly, “you have not lost any power. Let me put these things away, if they bring such foolish thoughts. Begin something which will be fresh, which won’t remind you of the past. I will go into the village and look for models for you to-morrow, and then after a little while you will get over your fastidiousness and send for them from town. Or if you are afraid the London models will be hackneyed, you can hire the costumes. Meanwhile,” she added, a little nervously, “I suppose it wouldn’t be any good for you to make a sketch of me.”

“Not *any good!*” Bryan looked at her with a smile which she could not easily interpret. It was the very thing he had longed to ask her. Did Charley know that she was daily gaining a beauty of face, growing out of the earnest happiness of her life, which no frivolity could

have given her? When he had first seen her in Curzon Street, he had thought her a transparent, unusual-looking creature, and yet not exactly beautiful. The tiny head had seemed to be overburdened with that weight of dusky hair, and there had been something almost painful in her unchangeable, wistful look. But now there was a sunny benignity about her face which was in itself a perpetual feast: the curtain was withdrawn which had darkened her spirit.

In the former days he had thought her cold to every one but her sister: but he thought her so no longer. It was warm, passionate blood which flowed in her veins: and the contours, which had seemed as if cut out of stone, could kindle now with life and motion. At one time he had seen the shadow, now he beheld the woman. The impenetrable had had a charm for him, but the revelation of reality was infinitely more bewitching.

"Charley," he said, still looking at her with the expression which she found so impossible to fathom, "I think I must have a try at you; though I tell you, to begin with, that I shall

probably fail. You look like Mrs. Wordsworth, of whom they used to make a joke that she could only say 'God bless you!' and said it continually with her eyes. Now, how am I to put that look into a painting?

"Mrs. Wordsworth was a plain woman, if accounts are to be believed. I thought all men went by outsides," answered Charley, contentedly, but somewhat incoherently, trying pose after pose to satisfy her husband.

"Plain!—that's a word which we artists don't admit into our vocabulary. There was a German who wrote a book on the 'Æsthetics of ugliness.' I should have liked to have given it to you to read. He made out, to every one's perfect satisfaction, that even the toad had a distinctive beauty of its own. I once painted a toad near a tangle of water weeds—or rather tried to paint it—to find out what he meant. A charming bit of colour it made, with its eyes more brilliant than diamonds or rubies, in close proximity to the brightness of the green, and some grey lichen stones. But this physical

Bryan, looking up from the first outlines of his sketch; and then his face clouded—he suddenly changed his tone, “Ah! Charley, you would have shrank from me, if you could have known the horrible thoughts that filled my mind at one time, before I married you.”

“They were not *your* thoughts,” she said eagerly, noticing the break in his voice, and forgetting herself so far as to alter her position. “Do you not believe in the reality of temptation? Dearest, I love you all the better because you have been tried, and because you have conquered. Did not Spenser make his Sir Guyon pass through the Cave of Mammon, and the bower of earthly bliss, yet bring him out better and stronger for having suffered and abstained? You are my Guyon, my Sir Galahad!”

He went on with his painting unresponsive to her enthusiasm. He said no more on the subject, but he gave her a look—half-sad, half-smiling—which often after that haunted her memory.

CHAPTER XVI.

BRYAN'S picture progressed rapidly. It was intended to illustrate a little episode in history—possibly fabulous—of a Puritan maiden taking food by stealth to a father in captivity. The quaint simplicity of the costume, the chastened look of the intense face, and the patient sweetness of self-abnegation which shone from the earnest eyes, were all characteristic of Charley.

He had painted her stealing quietly along, with a basket half hidden from view under the folds of her cloak, in the recesses of a deep wood. Thick branches of dim trees made a shadow round her face, and her figure was reflected in a streamlet at her feet; whilst a few flecks of sunshine, which crept in between the

leaves, lit up with faint radiance the pure colouring of her face.

Never had model been more in tune with the altered taste of the painter. And if Bryan's picture was not so remarkable for the freshness of its tints, the opal clearness of its lights, and the harmonious depths of its chiaroscuro, as some of his earlier ones had been; it was evident that he, at least, had attained to a higher, subtler region of poetry. His work was not only refined and delicate in its conception, but well studied in its details, without any tricks of style or unnatural straining after effect.

Many happy days were spent by the Maxwells in the octagon-room while this picture was in progress—the husband busy at his work, and the little wife standing for him to study from her with untiring patience; or bringing her needlework, at other times, that she might amuse him or listen to his talk. I will not say how Bryan's paint-brush lingered over the modelling of the lithe throat, the moulding of the little pathetic mouth; or how he feared to fail in depicting the up-looking eyes—with the

earnest longing of a great love shining through the windows of her soul.

I am afraid the picture was very often interrupted by kisses, which were supposed to re-invigorate the flagging energies of the painter. The octagon-room told no secrets, and there was not even a mirror to reflect the image of a fair moustache too often intermingled with dusky locks, that had been loosened about the warm neck to suit the fancy of the artist.

"There, I want a long tress of it to have come down by accident, and to tremble in the wind—like that—that will do—" he said, as he turned her round—"What a length of it you have!"

"It's ugly dark stuff like mine which always grows such a length,—the hairdressers will tell you so," said Charley with a pout. "I'm so sorry—now you're painting it, that my hair should be so dark—such a heavy dark brown."

"Talk about what you understand," answered Bryan, a little affronted; "there are browns and browns—there's the colour of your hair for in-

stance, and the colour of mud. It is as impossible to express the variations of colour in language, as it is to give an idea of all through sounds in music."

There was no end of pleasure to be got out of this picture; for, when the figure was partially finished, there was the charming necessity for picnicing out of doors to make studies from the trees, so that the work in the octagon room was varied with many little impromptu expeditions.

There was the campstool and portable easel to be carried in state, and Charley would insist on the unnecessary ceremonial of a clean palette and a sheaf of brushes, without which it seemed to her impossible that Bryan could properly photograph the broad sweep of rich light through the colonnade of elm-trees.

And in the summer days, when the sunshine beat down upon their heads, there was the fun of putting up Bryan's little canvas tent, which was very hard to fix, and showed a singular propensity for coming down with a run, and bringing

Charley and himself to inextricable ruin. Then there were droll appurtenances of all sorts, from the basket containing the dinner, to the fire of hastily gathered sticks. And there were not a few discussions, with discontent on Charley's side, as to the wild flowers which the artist chose to study at the spot. The blue hyacinths had long ago disappeared, with their neighbours the wood anemone and the graceful celandine; but in their stead were summer favourites, half hidden beneath the unmown swathes of grass. None of these were despised by the painter, and his wife wondered much when she saw him copying the ordinary ragwort in the meadow, the red catchfly with sinuous patches of moss beneath the trees, to say nothing of the purple lythrum or meadowsweet overhanging the stream.

"Are you going to put in those common things?" objected Charley; "if you let me go and hunt I can find you something rare."

"Foolish child," he said, with the superior wisdom of a maestro. "I suppose all women

have something of Proserpine in them; they like to go wandering in search of flowers. But was it not one of your earliest lessons to call nothing common or unclean? I would take as much pains in painting a nettle as in the rarest hothouse flowers that ever were grown."

"Didn't I know it?" she answered sily—"that is why you like *me*. I'll remember—you prefer the weeds."

For only answer he patted the cheek, where a little carmine—brought by continual exposure to the air and sunshine—was positively glowing, and looked contentedly at the jewels which were flashing in his wife's eyes.

"No accounting for tastes," he answered absently—continuing his work with eager haste, too much occupied with it even to talk to her.

The work itself might have gone a long way towards making him happy; for, where power exists, the consciousness of it is almost always co-existent. The horse rejoices in the race, the eagle in the pleasure of spreading its wings, and even the ephemera may have exquisite sensa-

tions for the brief moments of their little lives in sporting in the sunshine. The talent in most cases "is the call," and when Bryan had once buckled to at his favourite art, the delight of creating fresh beauty came upon him with all its unabated intensity.

Happy days these were for both of them, with

"A world of strife shut out,
A world of love shut in."

I would fain linger on them, though descriptions of such happiness might pall upon my readers. And so long as the landmarks remain unre-moved which have made our English domestic life what it is, many will be able to fill in the outlines from their own experience.

Most of those who know a little of what the ideal of married life should be, must have had such a breathing-space of delicious comfort and peace at one time of their lives, when, in days like these, with heart resting upon heart, and mind communing with mind, they have been able to shut their doors upon the outer world, with all its distracting and irritating cares.

It cost Bryan a serious effort to be obliged to remind Charley, when once his picture was fairly progressing, that the home of married folk should not be a selfishness *à deux*, but a centre from which usefulness and benevolence should flow.

"That sounds like a bit from one of those magazine articles, which is sure to be followed by a page or two of the driest statistics," laughed Charley. "But I know what you mean. Now there is a prospect of a little more money, we must begin to make friends with the people at Collingford. I have visited half the cottages already, though I have not told you about my visits. They are in a deplorable condition still. I have tried to demonstrate to the old women the advantage of buying tea at wholesale prices, and of subscribing some pennies to me to get flannel petticoats. But they don't seem to see it. We must begin at the other end, as you intended at first."

"Yes," he said, "I have been getting an estimate made of what the improvements will cost,

and now I hope they will get on a little faster with the work. I must confess to having had a cowardly dislike to see the place more than I could help, till something could be done. But I too have visited my old friends without proclaiming it on the housetops. Did you see the tiles off the roofs, the plaster dropping from the walls, the ruined cowsheds, and the broken window-panes stuffed up with old rags? Ross's steward always avoided repairing anything, if he could help it."

* * * * *

After a while, the change in the cottages at Collingford was as wonderful as if one of the old magicians had been suddenly touching them with his wand. But the people resented some of the innovations with grumbling disapproval, as if they thought there was something uncanny about them.

Bryan had everything put in order; the woodwork was repaired, the walls were distempered, the pigstyes were cleaned out, and the pathways mended. All this involved an outlay

of capital, which Aladdin's insufficient income hardly seemed to justify. But there was a "wonderful lamp" to fall back upon for emergencies, which was hidden away in the octagon room. Frank Dillon had been down again to see the new picture, which was familiarly called "Wifie Fetching the Dinner," and had insisted upon taking it in exchange for the loan he had already advanced, saying he should be no loser by the bargain, but was certain to make a profit on it. This had given them a prospect of more ready money, and Bryan was firm in persisting in his whitewashing and building, in spite of the grumbling of the ignorant.

And after the newly-repaired cottages had been inhabited for a few months, during which time the rents were strictly enforced, it dawned upon Charley's astonished comprehension that the pecuniary result might be satisfactory in the end. She and her husband had already their reward in the improved moral tone which the new arrangements for the comfort and health of the people was beginning to produce.

The women ceased quarrelling, and at the

"mother's meeting," where Charley collected them once a week, those who had been the greatest enemies were reconciled as friends.

The children were gathered into schools, and—
• as an opposition to the public-houses—Bryan established a reading-room for the benefit of the men. A reading-room which he constantly frequented himself, delighting to teach them the rudiments of his art. Much ridicule was wasted on the Squire of Collingford's "Arcadia," and the rules which were drawn out in this Utopian school of art. But Bryan and Charley heard little of such gossip, which, owing to their isolation, had lost power to affect them.

The cumulative evil which had weighed so heavily on Bryan, seeming to be so great that it never could be coped with, was already lessening a little.

"I wish my mother could see what we are trying to do for Collingford—the dearest wish of her heart may yet be fulfilled," said Bryan one day as he threw himself on the sofa, returning wearied and heated from one of his walks to the village. (It had escaped Charley's notice how

often he was tired. The change had been so gradual that it crept on her unawares).

"Perhaps she *does* see it, or know it," answered the wife gently. "I believe in the Communion of Saints ; so do you."

"That poor Molly Trevors can't forget the Saturday night when Ross ordered her to be turned out of doors, because the rent was not forthcoming. All her money had been spent through illness, and the cottage was not fit for a dog to live in. But Ross, you know, left all these things to Crawford, and Crawford consulted him about this. I wish he had let it alone. I fear the poor soul will never recover the effects of that exposure to damp and cold. They say she rails against us yet ; it is hard for her to believe any good of the Maxwells," answered Bryan, still depressed. He was thinking that which he did not venture to say aloud to Charley, that he must make the best of the "salvage of life ;" and that the little good he might hope to effect would go small way in counteracting the mischief that had been wrought already.

CHAPTER XVII.

SO the days passed by, and summer was beginning again to mellow into autumn.

Bryan worked hard, sometimes at his painting, sometimes in the village. He was only attempting, as he said, to perform his own little stroke of work in the world. However tiny one's light might be, however insignificant, there remained the command not to hide it under a bushel. And no one could say but that the "stroke of work" was accomplished most unostentatiously. Bryan laboured on with one object before him, forgetting his former longings after success and after fame.

That object might be said to be fairly in view. The picture-dealers already foretold the time

when nobody's paintings would command a higher price in the market than Maxwell's.

But the work was beginning to tell upon him. He looked older, and so worn, that those who knew him well, could scarcely fail now to notice the change. The hair was beginning to thin on his temples, but of what consequence was premature baldness to him? You might have seen the change reflected in Charley. The happiness, which had glorified her face as with a halo, moulding every feature into greater beauty of expression, was giving way to a yearning reverent look of affection, with a return of the old wistful expression in her eyes as she watched her husband. There was the same lofty self-control about him, which there always had been, the same reticence about past sorrows which she did not like to break in upon. "But oh," she thought with a little tendency to repining, "can it be that I am not able to make him perfectly happy?—can it be that there is something missing which I can never fill up for him, or why should his face be saddened still? I thought the

sadness would pass away." It was not actually saddened. It had only that indescribable expression in it, which is seen in the face of Albrecht Durer's knight after his encounter with Death and the Devil.

One day late in September, when a few of the autumn berries were beginning to sparkle upon the trees like gems (for the season had been a forward one; and the foliage was beginning earlier than usual to be flecked with bright russet, rich amber, and gold), Charley returned from one of her walks to Collingford, to find her husband still busily occupied, at a later hour than usual, in the octagon room.

The work at Collingford was progressing to their satisfaction. In a little while Bryan hoped there would be no more broken hedges, no ill-kept cattle-sheds, and no unhealthy ditches to be seen near the village. He knew a little of agriculture, and had studied the subject to some advantage.

But the consequences of past evil were not to be remedied at once; and Charley was return-

ing, a little sad at heart, for she had been sitting with a mother who had lately lost a child, and no one knew better than herself that the child's health had been injured, and its death accelerated, by the cruel neglect of the most simple sanitary arrangements which until the last few months had characterized the place. The passionate lamentations of the bereaved woman were still ringing in her ears. Charley had listened to them in silence. She did not tell the poor mother that it was a "merciful relief" to have the child taken from her, nor that she was to rejoice at it. She had only attempted to soothe her grief by repeating fragments of Scripture.

"Better so," said Bryan, when she told him ; "the less we adulterate the fine gold with our human pinchbeck in such cases the better—the more we go back to the fountain-head of eternal truth, the more likely we are to succeed."

"And the poor creature was so grateful," said Charley, with tearful eyes. "You know we

heard such a bad account of Collingford ; but isn't it wonderful what a little kindness will do with people after all ?”

“ I never believe in bad accounts—I make a point of not believing them,” answered Bryan, giving a few vigorous touches to his painting. “ The Collingford people are terribly ignorant ; but I prefer a little raw material to work upon. The knotted wood gives a beauty to the carver's work. And as to the cottagers opposing us at first, we don't give the poor a chance when we plume ourselves on our superior wisdom, and are so easily irritated with their stupidity.”

“ No, we can't expect them to understand the meaning of our reforms at once,” answered Charley, meditatively.

“ It is charity which is wanted—the charity which pre-supposes an effort to enter into their feelings, and understand their prejudices,” answered her husband. “ The highest love is never passive. But the great principles of christianity have still to be enforced in the more important of their adaptations.”

He was beginning to speak languidly, and leant back in his chair, pushing the hair from his face, and revealing the violet veins which Charley did not like to see on his forehead. He had forgotten his sudden energy, and was speaking as if to himself—reflectively, as he often spoke—in a voice which seemed to come from a distance, from heights and depths of which she knew little. Perhaps he had acquired the habit when he lived so long alone.

Charley was silent; she began to grow pale. Her paleness increased, and she suddenly heaved a sigh.

Bryan heard it, and mistook its cause.

“I tease you with my grave thoughts. I am so apt to think of you as if you were another better self. And it is the worst of all my projects that they deprive you of luxuries, the little adornments and pleasures which should be properly yours—you ought to lead a life like a fairy princess.”

“Now for the first time you are wronging me,” pleaded his wife; “I am not like an

exotic bird, to be fed on costly seed; but a plain little sparrow, that can only chirp for its crumbs."

Bryan looked at her fondly, and smiled. "Don't you know that you are as an angel to me?" he said.

"I know nothing of the sort," pouted Charley: "your learning is in fault, sir, for a wonder. Bats are 'the only animals with wings. Not a very original remark, I believe. But even *I* could tell you that, though I never studied comparative anatomy like you."

He set her right. "I said you were *as* an angel, and you cannot deny it—you have brightened my life. We have the disadvantage of being poor while people believe us to be rich. But you have infused an air of the most perfect refinement into our poverty—you have taken the hardness of my heart away—you have made me see that I was rebellious and ungrateful. Child," he continued, gazing at her with that look of tender fondness, which made her turn away to hide her brimming eyes, "can I do

anything for you? Have you any wish unfulfilled? Is there anything that money could buy which would add to your happiness? Tell me if there is. I may be richer some day."

"No, nothing," she murmured, half offended at the question. "Have I not everything in having yourself?"

Little simpleton, she' lost her opportunity; she longed to entreat him to moderate his work. She longed to beg him to take rest, and could not gain courage to open up the subject.

CHAPTER XVIII.

ABOUT a fortnight later, when all the land was flooded with brilliant autumn sunshine, when the leaves of the trees were olive-green, glowing crimson, copper, and burnished gold, and when little children's feet were trotting in the fields after the rough-leaved nuts and ripening blackberries, the octagon room was empty, the brushes and palettes untouched.

On the one little table, which served Charley for her needlework, stood a bouquet of wild wood-treasures, such as Bryan loved to see, composed of the shining leaves and bright clusters of the bryony, sloeberries of delicate violet velvet, the feathery seeds of the travellers' joy, and a red branch of the cornel tree. The elegant little

bouquet had a disconsolate look, with the tiny thimble by its side, and a piece of delicate feminine embroidery, which had been hastily abandoned by the hand that had first gathered and then arranged the leaves. Only once a woe-begone face peeped for a minute into the room, to see that the unfinished pictures were covered up from the dust ; and then disappeared again, with the sound of a great sob that had been imprisoned with difficulty.

“Don’t be nervous about me. It’s only a little touch of the feverishness which one often gets in the country at the time of falling leaves,” said the invalid upstairs, who was stretching his large length of limb on the sofa by the window. But he looked so worn and weary, with the sun streaming in upon his tired face, and lighting up the long fair beard with touches of its red gold glory, that Charley had to escape again, lest the ball in her throat should choke her.

“Everyone,” as they said, “overpowered them with kindness.”

Even the rich people, whose acquaintance they had declined, seemed to bear them no grudge, but drove in their carriages to make enquiries at "The Towers." And then there were the anxious faces of those poorer friends who did not venture to knock or to ring at the door-bell, for fear of giving trouble, but who came in their Sunday garments and lingered about for hours for the chance of seeing the staid old house-keeper, and hearing her reassuring words.

"Better—very little the matter—doesn't feel strong to-day—that's all."

Some went away contented; others tried to waylay the doctor, who was at his wits' end (not a very long tether).

"See another physician, my dear sir," he urged; "don't hesitate about me. Call in Rollinson of London, or——"

"My dear doctor, don't waste your advice on an obstinate, pig-headed fellow like me. What would be the good of scaring my little wife out of her senses for nothing? Don't you remember I was always obstinate in the days of lang-

syne? Don't look so solemn; I shall be all right in a day or two—you'll see."

So he was, or seemed to be. Did he suspect otherwise in the silence of his own soul?

No one could tell. Not even the devoted wife who, once or twice athwart her happy life, had felt the dark shadow of an awful possibility, and put away the thought of it as one too terrible to bear.

"Ah me!" she thought impatiently, as so many human creatures had thought before her, "I have had so little happiness—so little—in my life. God could not let it be! He would not put the cup of bliss so close to my parched lips, and draw it away before I had taken the first rich draught of joy."

She preferred to drift on, dreading she knew not what. She would not give the evil which haunted her any name—any proper definition, but roused herself from her melancholy and went out with a rosy apple to feed Bryan's horse, which was whinnying for him in the field.

"In a few days," she said, returning with her hat slung over her arm, and a little colour in her cheeks, at her prettiest and best, "you will be able to ride again. If you won't have change of air, you must ride out as much as possible." And then she added timidly, creeping to his side, and resting her head caressingly on his big shoulder, "you must promise me not to work much this year. You say you wouldn't be quite happy without it; but will you always work like this?"

"Always? Why do you ask, little wife?—are you tired of watching me?"

"Tired of watching you? Oh! no, no, you know I am not. And I am so proud of your pictures; but then——"

"But then what, dear?"

"Has it not been too much for you sometimes? I fear it might be quite too much in the future."

She spoke very low.

He sighed a little, passing his long thin

fingers over his eyes, and then looked up with a smile.

"We must have a holiday soon, Charley; it will do us both good. You are getting moped with this dull life—nearly six months of it. Has it seemed very long to you, little wife?"

"Bryan!"

"Ay, I know my answer. Perhaps that was why I asked," he said, smiling as he looked down at her eloquent face, and felt the loving pressure of her arms round his neck. "Well, but for your companionship I might have broken down. Nothing rests me so much as companionship with you."

* * * * *

As soon as Bryan had resumed his regular habits, there came a visitor to "The Towers," who had long been expected. The visitor was Dr. Ford, whom Bryan had met the year before at Brussels, and whose acquaintance he had made under circumstances which revealed the character of both men to each other, and enabled the new friendship to ripen with rapidity. The

doctor, fresh from the dry routine of professional work, or the atmosphere of fashionable life in a foreign town, was just the man to appreciate the idyllic charm and simplicity of the life at Collingford.

He was delighted with the primitive old house, half dwelling-place, half ruin ; with the Virginian creepers, which now were turning into blood red, and stonecrop adorning its lichen-stained walls. He was equally enthusiastic about the park, which Nature had been adorning with her rich palette of varying tints ; with the russet splendours of the bracken, the yellow leaves of the elm-trees, and the sere magnificence of the oak. And, to complete the fairy picture, the artist's wife seemed to him a sort of Imogen and Desdemona rolled into one, gentle and single-minded to a degree that was rare. He admired her childish innocence, her simple, flower-like face, with the thick dusk hair making a shade about it ; and, bachelor though he was, and accustomed to laugh at domestic felicity, he thought nothing prettier than Charley in her

simple morning wrapper, neatly-braided hair, and pretty little Cinderella slippers, presiding over the tea and fresh eggs at the breakfast-table. He envied Bryan for being the proprietor of so many productive acres, and pished scornfully when he was reminded that the productiveness might be dependent upon the fluctuations of temperature, sunshine, and rainfall.

He came with the intention of being properly enchanted, and had that boylike determination to make the best of a holiday which is characteristic of most Englishmen, let people say what they will about our taking pleasure sadly. But there was one drawback to the poetry which seriously interfered with the good doctor's enchantment. At the first sight of Bryan he received a shock. Not that the artist was altered for the worse, as far as the æsthetical side of the question was concerned. He fancied, on the contrary, that Bryan was better-looking than he had been when he had seen him a year before in Brussels. Then the face had been disturbed, now it was more restful. The loving essence of the man

was apparent to keen observers. Bryan had never been strictly handsome, and now the originality and impressiveness of his appearance was caused less by the perfection of any separate feature, than by the harmonious combination, the perfect "keeping" of the whole. But why was he so pale with this shadowy pallor? Why did he put his hand so constantly to his side?

Dr. Ford cross-examined the housekeeper, and, during the first day of his visit, put a whole catechism of questions to the little maidservant who brought him his towels (one of "the luxuries of old England," he said, "was to have no end of cold water, and real proper rough towels; the things they used on the Continent were fit for pocket-handkerchiefs"). He was assured that the Collingford doctor had pronounced "master to be well."

"Then the doctor is a fool, or his diagnosis must have been hurried and careless—and in that case he's a knave, which is fifty times worse. *I must watch, Maxwell,*" was his mental comment.

He cast the matter over in his mind on the following morning whilst he refreshed himself with his bath; taking violent exercise afterwards, accompanied by the same noises with which ostlers amuse themselves when they are grooming a horse. His conclusions were not satisfactory; but he made his appearance at the breakfast-table, apparently glowing, shining, and enthusiastic as ever.

"I've just had a draught of fresh milk from one of your cows," he said, rubbing his hands in schoolboy fashion together; "I haven't had such a treat for many a long year. I must congratulate you on your live stock, Maxwell; a charming breed of cows, with pretty brown eyes. I don't wonder that the Greeks took their simile for the beautiful eyes of some women from the soft ones of oxen." And he looked admiringly at Charley, who was so little self-conscious that she had no idea of his meaning; but quietly reminded him that he could get "new milk in Belgium, more easily than he could in England."

“Not to taste half as well to my mind; and when one is worked to death—hurried here, there, and everywhere, what chance can one have of inhaling sweet odours, and seeing fresh morning sights? A doctor’s life is perfect slavery,” he explained with a beaming face, as if he were enunciating some particularly consolatory fact. “And a life abroad makes one hate everything that is artificial. I feel as if I should never care to taste *pâtés* or *fricandeaux* again. I should like to picnic day after day amongst your old ruins, they are fifty to one better than all the modern houses.”

“Festooned as they are now with masses of Virginian creepers, which has lent them an unusual glow of splendour,” answered Bryan, smiling. “But how about November and December, when you would be ankle deep in mud? Though I agree with you in not caring for newly-chiselled stone until it gets properly toned down with time; there is something raw about it which makes one shudder.”

“And you agree with me in admiring your

own grey ribbed trees, with the sturdy John-Bull look about them? No doubt, but you're a lucky fellow."

"Lucky if all this belonged to me indeed, if it were truly mine without encumbrance? Yes, there is nothing like the scenery of England. I return to it again and again to drink in its quiet beauty. It requires to be studied like the inhabitants of the country, but its attractions grow up on you the more you study them. All that may be true enough. But this place is only mine under painful conditions. I am in some respects as poor as a labourer on my own estate."

"And don't you live with Nature, making a companion of her? Are you not wealthier after all in these rich possessions of earth and sky, than many a landed millionaire who thinks only of his prosperity? For my part I don't even care about owning things so long as I can see them. Six feet of earth must suffice us all in our graves. Pooh, pooh, man, you don't care for gimeracks of buhl or ormolu, and I can see by your economy you'll soon clear off the

debt," said the plain-spoken doctor, true all the while to his professional instinct, and carrying out his resolution of "keeping his eye on Maxwell," so earnestly that he was scarcely conscious of what nonsense he might be talking.

"Pity such an excellent fellow as that," he was saying to himself. "If he were to take it in time, he might pull through a few more years."

"You should not work so hard," said the unsuspecting Charley, noticing that the conversation had flagged, and addressing herself with all due politeness to her guest. "No man should allow his profession to degenerate into slavery."

"Tell your husband that," commented the doctor internally. "*I don't poison myself with turpentine or rub whitelead into my skin. I wonder if he sucks his paint-brush—they always get it on their hands; sensitive—poetical,—not fitted for a sedentary pursuit, or the rough grinding of toil; it'll kill him by inches I wonder if it will be of any use to allude to the state of his health. He seems to be absolutely ignorant of it, or culpably careless about it.*"

"You are right," he said, speaking aloud to the hostess; "there are loads of people who systematically overwork themselves, without being aware of it. They may be deceived as to the extent of the mischief they are doing to themselves, just as a machine may go on from mere impetus for a little time. A man may draw unconsciously more and more on his vital powers, and keep doing so in his ignorance, till the nervous system becomes exhausted, and there is instant collapse."

Dr. Ford had forgotten his boyishness, and had relapsed into his grave professional manner. He had two distinct manners: one or the other could be taken up, and put off again like a garment.

The change in him was so obvious, that Bryan suspected an ulterior meaning, and fidgetted nervously with his toast, cutting it up in pieces, and piling it into a little cromlech; whilst Charley visibly started, the blood rushing to her cheeks.

"I have seldom met with these cases of over-

work," answered Bryan, with assumed carelessness. "My experience is that most men would be better if they did more."

"Then our experiences differ," said the doctor drily, leaning back in his chair, and continuing his mental commentary.

"Tut, tut! I thought he had some absurd theory of that sort; we must try and shake it out of him, if we can. The mere energy of his spiritual nature and the desperate force of his will, will cause him to deceive himself as to his physical strength. Every act of his is a feeble effort against the shackles which are fettering his powers. There is a tenacity of life about such men, that's one comfort about it; the bodily forces don't have to sustain the conflict unaided. And then that careful little wife of his. If we can only take it in time, there are merciful possibilities for him yet."

* * * * *

In the middle of the day the doctor wandered into the octagon-room.

The room had become a curious *mélange*, for

Bryan would allow no "putting to rights," and Charley was too wise to attempt the experiment, greatly as she longed to gather up and burn the useless rubbish which littered the floor, and soiled the skirts of her neat dresses. In the studio Bryan's rights as a lord of creation were paramount, and Charley had not even ventured to interfere with an old velveteen smoking-jacket, which was tossed on one of the chairs, a meerschaum which looked as if it had seen much service, a row of dusty plaster casts, and a great screen hung with sketches.

The doctor seated himself in silence. The painter had not been aware of his entrance. Occasionally, when he was attempting an unimportant sketch, or finishing up a foreground, Bryan would interlard his work, as we have seen, with a stream of little remarks. But when the inspiration was on him, his head and hands worked together; and when his mind was absorbed, he was deaf to all disturbing noises. On the previous evening the doctor had wondered what the enervating and devital-

izing influences could be which were sapping this man's frame from day to day. Now the problem was solved at once. For although the doctor could not know that the hands were not only shaking, but the eyes throbbing with excitement, so that the whole room was sometimes blurred to the painter, yet he could guess the nervous energy which must be expended on the work, from the sight of the flushed cheeks and trembling fingers. It was evident that Bryan entered so thoroughly into the spirit of the scene he was painting, as to make it certain that a corresponding degree of exhaustion must necessarily follow.

The doctor rose quietly, and looked over his friend's shoulder.

The picture was taken from one of Kingsley's novels. It represented the temple scene of Hypatia assaulted by her enemies. In the rapt expression of the central figure, with outstretched arms in its white drapery, in the dignity and pathos of the attitude, free from the least exaggeration, and in the noble cast of the inspired features, Bryan had unconsciously reproduced a

likeness of Sara Trevanion. He had been frightened himself, and had done his utmost to destroy the likeness when he had recognized his model. But the eyes and hands, the old tricks of expression, had unconsciously grown out of the canvas, as if by some necromancy which he was powerless to prevent. Even in the whiteness of the outstretched arms, the shimmer of the unbound hair, it had been difficult to prevent himself from recalling the well-remembered modelling of other arms, the brown shot with gold of other hair. He acknowledged it to himself with some surprise and a sudden qualm. But fortunately Charley said nothing; he hoped she had not seen it.

In a prominent position in the room stood the finished picture of the little Puritan girl, which, to eyes accustomed to regular beauty, might have been in its first effect a little disappointing. Looking at it closer, there was something so touching in the resignation to suffering, the gentleness without tameness, and holy innocence expressed in the face, that weak-nerved

people had to turn away from it with an inclination to tears.

"This man has unusual power," thought the doctor as he gazed around him. "These women are living women—never to be forgotten. And that crowd in the temple—how correct are the costumes! though the wonderful effect of those gorgeous tints contrasting with the grave garments of the monks, might make one overlook a little occasional anachronism. I suppose he has the models sent down from London."

He cleared his throat to interrupt the painter. But Bryan did not look round him, and the doctor crept away rather guiltily from the studio, determining to have his talk at a more favourable opportunity.

After lunch he found Charley waiting in the sitting-room, dressed in her usual walking costume. (The Maxwells had adhered to their resolution of having few rooms, and keeping the drawing-room shut up.)

"You will excuse my husband," she said; "he is generally occupied between the hours of

breakfast and dinner, and he has something on hand which he wants particularly to finish. I am ready to go with you wherever you like."

The doctor was so charmed with the wise thickness of her boots, the suitability of her warm shawl, and her sensible hat, that he accepted her offer, and tried to forget that he would have to act as a Nemesis in this place. The afternoon was passed in lionizing, after which they spent an evening in pleasant talk. And when Charley had gone to bed the two men sat together.

"Have a weed, Ford?" asked Bryan, having recourse to his favourite narcotic, yielding, now that his wife had gone, to a sense of prostration, stretching out his long legs in lazy abandonment, and propping himself up with two or three chairs.

"Ah! you haven't left off your old habits?"

"No—why should I? Practise, you preacher," said Bryan gaily, holding out a cigar. But the doctor knew that the gaiety was assumed; and

now that the stimulant of excitement was withdrawn, he saw how miserably weak he was).

The cigar was accepted, and they smoked in silence, Bryan waiting now and then to cough.

"Maxwell," said the visitor abruptly, "how long is it since you have had that——"

"Cough? oh!" he answered smiling, "I have always had it, I believe. By the way, Ford——" and he began to talk on indifferent subjects.

The doctor was not to be so shut up.

"It is ruination—utter destruction—to be going on in this way," he continued sternly; "burning the candles at both ends—overdoing yourself in every way, and keeping these late hours."

"I will go to bed at once, if you think the hours are too late," said Bryan with alacrity. "If you are getting on hygienics, perhaps I had better leave you. But, bless me, it's only eleven o'clock. What do you take me for?"

"Stay and hear me. You have had an attack of illness—one or two attacks, years ago, I daresay, if you acknowledge the truth. And now

you are forcing yourself to paint before you are fit for it—shattered in nerves and worn in body—you are an idiot!"

"I'll stay," said Bryan a little sulkily; "but don't be so personal in your remarks, if you please; I shall forget you are an old friend, and be downright angry if you talk so."

"I don't care a fig for your anger," said the doctor, snapping his fingers. "Perhaps you mayn't have to give up work altogether for your life; but you must never do much again, if you don't wish to commit suicide. You don't understand the *dolce far niente*. I'm afraid it'll be hard work to make you understand it. But can't you see that it is necessary sometimes to stay the progress of a machine, if it be merely to oil it, and re-adjust it for working? Arrestment of force is not necessarily retrogression."

"I can't live without work. It may be said of a painter, I suppose, as well as a poet, *nascitur non fit*, with his faults as he is," answered Bryan, trying to laugh him out of his solemn advice. "There's no improving the animal—

you must take me as I am, my good friend, without grumbling."

"Better to live for the advancement of art, than to die a martyr to an idea," growled the doctor, now fairly out of temper. "You are killing the goose that lays the golden eggs."

"Doctor, you don't know the cruel necessity of the case," said Bryan, turning grave, and suddenly lowering his voice—"I am a pauper seeming rich. The irony of fortune has given me an estate encumbered with many debts—I must work to pay them off, to clear my own name and the names of my fathers. I hope I shall live to do it, and then—" he broke off, his voice was a little husky. "Doctor, what do you think of me? Is my condition really so bad? Are the lungs affected?" He hesitated, and put his hand to his side. "There is one, God knows how dear, for whose sake I would fain live. Tell me the truth."

Dr. Ford coughed, blew his nose, and said,

"My dear fellow, I've not examined you. And our knowledge in theory is so scanty, so

infinitesimal, I can only venture a guess. I should say the lungs were affected—perhaps not seriously so. There's a loss of nutritive function, which might account for the emaciation. You should get away from this place at this season of the year—such an unhealthy moisture strikes from these woods—too chill in the evenings. You oughtn't to have that window open now. Will you have a consultation? I should very much prefer it."

"I would if it were not for my wife; we can't alarm her at present," said Bryan, still speaking very low. He was now ashy pale. "Tell me," he said, his voice sinking to a whisper, "do you think I shall live to see my child?"

"Oh! it is not so bad as that." Dr. Ford coughed again. "I will examine you to-morrow myself. I hope we may find very little the matter. You must go to bed and to sleep now. Don't attempt to get up to breakfast after this exciting talk."

"Thank you. Good-bye. God bless you, old fellow!"

The doctor wrung his hand, and left him with a very sore heart.

And Bryan looked up at the midnight sky, with little islets of cloud floating near the horizon. All the stars were shining, and the "innumerable heavens" were "breaking open to their highest." Hitherto he had rejoiced at such a spectacle; and now he gazed solemnly at it. Had he an awful feeling of what might be so near to him—of what a few months, or even weeks, might bring to pass? Did the old doubts recur to him, as he felt himself to be but a helpless atom on this solid-seeming earth, which was in itself but "an atom among atoms," whirling on amongst illimitable space? Was he so soon to find the key to riddles, and to know the answer to unsolvable questions? Could he realize the separation from that body through which alone he had hitherto received ideas? Could he form the least conception of that shadowy realm, those secrets of eternity which none had hitherto returned to tell? . . . Thoughts such as these we do not share with

even the "nearest heart, and next our own." But whatever Bryan thought, he did not withdraw his eyes for some instants from the star-sown depth of space.

"God grant me life," he repeated when he did so, "at least to welcome and bless my child."

CHAPTER XIX.

WHEN the next morning came Bryan followed his friend's advice.

He pleaded fatigue to Charley, and let her bring him his breakfast. If she had not been anxious she would rather have enjoyed the prospect nursing him. It is so pleasant to most women to have somebody to take care of.

But when, after attempting to take a little food, he tried to rise, and fell back on the pillow, complaining of faintness, an overmastering terror came upon her, turning the lilies in her face into peonies.

"I certainly suffer from great shortness of breath," he said, resting his head on his wife's shoulder. "I can't get my breath very well

lying down. Perhaps you had better send for Ford."

His voice was almost indistinct, and, in spite of herself, Charley was reminded of the trembling of a flame which any chance breath might extinguish. A momentary dimness came before her eyes, everything was blotted out in darkness, and a noise as of many waters was sounding in her ears. She did not know if it were the beating of her heart, but she felt a fluttering as of wings within her.

She wondered that she had strength to reach the bell, paralyzed as she was by that terrible fear.

Dr. Ford came at once in answer to the summons, and found the husband still leaning heavily on the wife. The blood had receded from Charley's face, and left her almost the paler of the two. No word crossed her whitened lips, but she was looking vacantly before her with staring eyes, and the doctor noticed a convulsive movement of her fingers.

"Let me relieve you, Mrs. Maxwell," he said,

gently trying to give her a warning glance.

Everything in the room seemed to be dancing up and down, and there was still that rushing sound in her ears; but she stifled the hysterical "No" which was ready to force its way from her lips, and grudgingly resigned her place, looking at Bryan with a smile. Ah me! of all the trials of sorrow and sickness, the necessity for smiles such as these is about the worst. Poor little Charley gave such a smile as a martyr might have forced on his quivering lips, when his limbs were being stretched upon the cruel rack.

"Maxwell, you must prepare her; we must have that consultation. I will send to London at once," whispered Dr. Ford in his patient's ear. Then he said aloud, "I suppose you never let the house be without brandy? We must have some here at once." And he whispered again. "There's nothing to be frightened about in this—a little shock of the nervous system. I was a stupid bungling fellow, and you alarmed yourself unnecessarily last night."

In a short time Bryan's sensation of faintness yielded to the usual remedies, and Charley tried to persuade herself that anyone might have had such an attack.

The doctor left them when Bryan was settled upon the sofa, not looking by any means uncomfortable, but enjoying a little of the luxury of repose.

"Come and sit by my side," he said. "I am afraid I frightened you, little wife; but now you look like yourself again. I like that quiet grave serenity of yours better than the look of a startled deer. It reminds me of one of the old Madonnas."

For a moment they remained silent, hand folded in hand. And then the sunshine tried to creep into the room, and a branch of red leaves from the Virginian creeper tapped against the window-pane.

Charley rose to draw down the blind, but Bryan motioned to her to sit still.

"I don't feel really ill. I like the sunshine," he said, in answer to her imploring eyes. "Talk

to me, if you like. I can hear all that you say. It is a pleasant sort of illness ; as if I were going into a peaceful sleep."

Charley was not like a Madonna now, for her features were suddenly distorted with a spasm of pain, and there was a look of wild yearning in her eyes. But she continued to sit bolt upright, breathless and motionless, trying to betray nothing of the tearing and rending of that agonizing grief like a fire within her, nothing of the sick fear which was again bewildering her.

Alas! she knew that it was possible for the husband she had so idolized, soon to be pressed in a colder embrace than hers! I say "idolized," to use a popular term; but, as old Jacob Böhmen expresses it, "Nature did not come into us for the sake of sin, and why should it fall away for the sake of grace?" He only who made us knows whether that perfect union of human hearts, which He Himself instituted in its intensity, is to be called by the hard name of idolatry; I believe that each pure human affection is as a fresh beacon to light us to heaven.

"I can't live without you," she murmured in a voice in which supreme anguish strove with the determination to keep it from jarring on him. "Without you the whole world would have no meaning for me; Bryan, you will kill me if you say such things."

"Try to think differently," he continued, drawing her to him. "Death is a father's sentence." She shivered again, and he drew her closer. "I will not repeat the word, dear, if you do not like to hear it; but it must come to both of us sooner or later. I was going to remind you, that it is only mis-spent hours which make death terrible."

She lifted her white, tortured face, and sat still again rigid as a stone. He was terrified at her composure, and exerted himself to continue—

"In love, you know, dear, time is annihilated; it is a nonentity. If one of us went before the other, the few short years to be spent alone would make no difference to our essential union. And if we were for years together on earth, our

love could not be stronger, or more firmly rooted than it is."

He waited for her answer, but it was more than she could bear. She put her hands forward in deprecation,—in pitiful expostulation; and—looking at him heart-wrung with the sense of a possibility of unutterable woe—gave a low moaning sigh, and mechanically repeated—

"I could not live without you—you know I couldn't."

The tremor in her voice broke his. He made one more ineffectual effort to speak, and then lay still, satisfied to know her near him, and to wait for the result.

Only when Dr. Rollinson arrived from London late in the afternoon, in answer to the telegram which had summoned him, and when Charley was able to rush from the sick-room, covering her face instinctively with her hands to hide the sudden shower of scalding tears, which blistered her cheeks and inflamed her eyes, falling almost without her knowledge—could she

at all realize her own position. Her heart, which had seemed at first to stand still, was pulsing on with rapid bounds. She was absolutely terrified at her own wild grief, her conscious sense of passionate revolt as she crouched on the floor in the adjoining dressing-room ; rocking herself to and fro in a paroxysm of terror, with chattering teeth and hair ruffled about her face, listening with dilated eyes and sharpened hearing to every footstep in the house, and the stir of every leaf of the trees by the open window ; her whole body shaken at intervals with a tempest of overwhelming sorrow.

There is a popular fallacy in the idea that it is the invariable effect of great anxiety or sorrow, to strengthen the good in us, instead of developing the evil. In this hour of darkness it seemed to Charley as if Death were the king and conqueror of the world. Her whole nature revolted from her husband's philosophy.

"Am I wicked—unworthy of him still? Just like I used to be in the old days—seeking my own will?" she thought bitterly to herself; and

then again she was swept by the tide of her passion, and said, "After all he cannot love me much, to speak of it so calmly—to talk of separation when I am so one with him that life would be no life to me if our unity were broken."

She listened again to the closing of a door—the flicker of leaves outside the window, or the trill of a happy bird's evening song.

It had been late when Dr. Rollinson arrived, and now the evening was drawing in—the daylight was waxing dim. She seemed to feel the shadows creeping and lengthening, as she knelt with her head pressed between her trembling hands, just as the moral shadows were creeping in upon her heart. She did not look up to verify the fact of the approaching night, for again her limbs began to feel stiff and paralyzed from bodily prostration. She wondered how it was that her blood still circulated, and her pulses still beat, when she seemed to be so dead to outward sense.

"What for him to die *now*, when their cup of

happiness had been full? He who had suffered so much, and had so much now to live for? Could God be merciful who could give and take away? At the very time when she had reached the height, was she to be plunged again into the abyss?"

And again she felt in that hour of temptation as if death, and death alone, were the monarch of the world, the moaning of creation the only music to be heard! Degrading recollections of mortality and decay crowded in upon her brain.

"I can't live without him," she moaned mechanically, scarcely aware of the faithlessness of the words she was uttering.

And then as she raised her head because the attitude had become painful, she saw that the world without was dark as the world within.

Just a few evening stars were glittering in the sky. The night was a clear one, and in another half-hour, when the darkness would be denser, the heavens would be sown all over with interminable star-hosts. And the thought came

into her head that though one star might disappear to her mortal eyes, thousands upon thousands always glittered unseen, cohorts upon cohorts, that lived unto their Creator. For the second time she shed tears, and then she began to reason, "Either God must desire and be effecting the eternal welfare of his creatures, or there could be no Almighty God, as they had believed in Him, at all!" Poor Charley's tears flowed faster. "Had she been an atheist, or little more than an atheist? Bryan must never know how wicked she had been."

She threw herself on a chair, and tried to shut out thought; to let it lapse into vacuity, and to surrender her will. Bryan's watch, which had been put on a stand, ticked inexorably on the mantelpiece. But she never heard the ticking, there was no such thing as time for her in those ages of pain. Suddenly she heard the murmur of voices.

She roused herself to partial consciousness; the doctors were coming out. Charley tried to rise and could not. Then she thought it did not

matter; she could not bring herself to put the question, which they on their part would try to evade.

"I shall know it," she added, "only too soon, when I see their faces."

At that instant there came a tap at the door, and Dr. Ford appeared with a candle in his hand. It seemed like a maze of light to Charley, it was all confusion in the entanglement of her brain; and the honest face she was too cowardly to study, looked blurred and featureless to her in her blindness.

"What, here alone!" he said in a cheerful tone; "you ought to have had somebody to look after you all this time. Have you been here a whole hour without any refreshment? Let me get you a glass of wine."

(Only an hour—was it possible? Whole æons of suffering seemed to have been compressed into that sixty minutes).

"Never mind," she said feverishly, "I don't want it." She was not conscious that she was speaking in a harsh unwomanly voice; nor that,

in her blind unreasoning sorrow, she was angry with the visitor who seemed to have brought this calamity into their Eden. What would Bryan's death signify to him, whose vocation it was to see scores of people die? Of course medical men were familiarized with suffering; of course it was their specialty to speak lightly of it."

"Let me be," she said turning away from him.
"I am better alone."

No one could accuse her of weeping now. The paroxysm of tears was succeeded by prostration, but there was a sound as of sobbing still in her voice. She was unable to conquer her feeling of irritation, and had a longing desire to get rid of this messenger, lest she should hear the sentence which she dreaded from him. She feared even to look at him, lest his lips should form the answer to her restless questioning eyes.

"I must not let you be," he answered kindly, "till I have told you my good news—it is good news, on the whole, we have to give you about

our patient. He has been living too fast, and exhausting the nervous energy; but with good and careful *régime* he may go on for years."

"Is there any real disease?" asked Charley, faintly, hope for the first time vibrating in her voice.

"Tut, tut!—what creatures women are for asking questions! How few of us can say there is nothing the matter with us! Your husband will require great care, Mrs. Maxwell; you mustn't let him work again. The lungs are just in that delicate state that serious mischief might set up. It seems he broke a blood-vessel some months ago. Stupid fellow to say nothing about it! He won't need much medicine, but plenty of nourishment and carefully modulated temperature; and he must winter abroad, if he can," he added, involuntarily rubbing his hands together, for he had anticipated a verdict which would have been so much worse. "Come, come, you mustn't think of fainting, for he wants you to go to him. Try and conquer it," he said, encouragingly, "or you will throw him back again."

There was a little interval before Charley knew that water was being held to her lips. Her brain was still whirling as she rose and let herself be supported to the open window. Relief had come to her, but not perfect relief. She had prayed for Bryan to be entirely restored; but there are times when God does not hear our prayers in the way in which we in our short-sightedness desire. We cannot expect miracles to be wrought on our behalf."

The poor little wife did not reason on this, as she went, still almost blinded and trembling in her walk, leaning on the friendly arm, into the adjacent room.

Bryan was lying quiet, with the lamplight shining on him, and with that expression of complete resignation to bodily weakness to be seen in his eyes, which is as pathetic to witness as it is rare. He had heard the medical opinion, and knew more than his wife. But that opinion had satisfied him, and all his face radiated, as if fire that had been covered in till now had suddenly illuminated it, when he saw Charley.

"Come here, little wife," he said, stretching out his arms—"have you heard what they say? We may have years to spend together yet. I would rather live and be happy as long as you need me. I can't believe that people who love as we do can really wish to be separated before the time—that is, if you can manage to bear with such a great helpless log as they say I must be. Is it hard for you to be tied to it? Are you satisfied, little wife?—it might have been worse."

"Yes, dear," she said, with an effort;—she could not have spoken another word.

CHAPTER XX.

OUR scene changes again to Hastings, late in the month of November. In a warm, comfortable room facing the sea, on a sofa drawn close to the blazing fire, a pale, sickly-looking woman was lying, watching, with anxious eyes, the face of a girl who was sitting at her feet.

For a while there was silence in the room. They had taken the apartments on the parlour floor, and one of the windows was a little way open, so that the silence was now and again relieved by the sound of the waves falling on the sand with a dull monotonous thud, or the louder roar of the occasional break of the advancing tide upon the shingle.

The girl had an open letter on her lap, and the eyes that watched her were sometimes filled

with tears. Indeed, the activity of Aunt Jenny's mind, on every matter which was connected with her niece, had greatly retarded her own recovery, and increased the wrinkles on her kindly face.

"Well, Sallie, dear?" she questioned at last, despairing of any result from her scrutiny of the handsome, unimpassioned face.

At first Sara did not hear her, as she sat in listless attitude looking out upon the sea, watching the waves crisping under the wind, and changing into an endless variety of colour. Of what was she thinking?—of the jealousy, the humiliation, the heart-burning that was over? Of her own heart, which was like a haunted chamber, filled with memories of the life that had been acted for so long a time, that the vacuum left by such acting, the empty weariness was hers—the pain of which pursued her so that she could not escape from it.

Aunt Jenny did not know, she could not guess her thoughts; but her niece's magnificent eyes glanced absently at her, as if through un-

fathomable distances of a sorrow that was unexplainable, and that others could not share. The poor lady was used to such glances from her niece. To the world Sara was now always the same—her fits of exaggerated gaiety had ceased. She was never enthusiastic now as she once had been, but had graduated scales of admiration adjusted to the fitness of things. In society she was chilling and incomprehensible; nothing seemed to affect her greatly; and even her artistic perceptions had become blunted. But with Miss Armitage the mask was thrown off; and Aunt Jenny was accustomed to see Sara in hours of self-abandonment, when the poor lady was only made more painfully conscious of the existence of some hidden barrier which seemed to separate them definitely from each other.

“Well, Sallie?” she said again, looking at her compassionately.

The girl roused, and said impatiently,

“He is coming, Aunt Jenny. I suppose I must let him come. What more would you

know? It will be time enough, I suppose, to find an answer when he comes. I wish he cared less for me, and then he would leave me alone."

"Find an answer when he comes! Why, Sallie, you were never one to doubt your own mind."

"Was I not?" she said wearily, in the incoherency of her reverie. "My principal wonder is that any one marries."

"You are becoming quite an adept in the art of mystification," said Miss Armitage, still trying to speak cheerfully. "I was never clever enough to read your riddles."

"Dear," said the girl, pushing her stool a little nearer to her, and resting her head caressingly on her aunt's lap, "are you tired of me? Tell me the truth. I shouldn't wonder at all if I had tired everybody out. Do you wish to be rid of me?"

"My darling," said the fond, gentle voice, "you know no one is tired of you; you are just as popular now as you always have been. I

have only been afraid that all the flattery was spoiling you."

"I am sure I appreciate the interest people take in me," answered Sara, with a little sarcasm, and much real indifference. "But you need not be afraid," she continued, with one of the smiles which were so difficult to read; "I am past all such illusions now; their flatteries are not likely to have any intoxicating effect upon me. Indeed, if one thing more than another would make me accept this offer, it would be that I have such a horror of going back to town. Everybody will expect it; and I am so weary of the old life, so tired of the ceaseless chatter of drawing-rooms."

"Hush!" said the old lady, "you have youth and health before you—why do you talk so? You wouldn't wish to be niched up for all your life with me."

"Yes, I would," she continued, still speaking languidly. "Perhaps it would be safest. Let me lie still, and feel that it is good to be here. Put your hand on my forehead. I like to feel

it there. I never had a mother to bless me so."

"But, Sallie," pleaded the aunt, as she fondled the pretty head, with all its wealth of rich hair, that was pillowed on her knees, "I am such a poor weak thing. Who is to take care of Sallie when she turns into a frolicsome kitten again? and, darling, I hope to see that day. You can't be cooped up with a poor sick woman all your life, wasting your strength. And, Sallie, who will ever love you so well as *he* has loved you? I have known—guessed this for years. I watched you both, you see, and lookers-on, they say, see most of the game. Ah, it was all play to you, but to him it was——"

"Don't, aunt," exclaimed Sara, pushing away the hand which she had asked to be placed, but a minute before, on her head. "You will drive me mad if you talk in this way. I ought to be proud, I suppose, of his good opinion; for he is a man whose good opinion is certainly worth having. But I am tired of people being enthusiastic about me. Do you know, it makes

my heart ache with the loathing I have for myself, when I hear the fine things they say about me, and know that some of them would start back with aversion if they knew me as I am. It is true," she added, irritably, as she caught her aunt's astonished gaze. "I am all bespattered and splashed from head to foot with spots of this world's mud. I forgot that you couldn't find a clean place to put your hand on when I asked you to bless me."

It was seldom she said so much, or spoke so bitterly of herself, and Miss Armitage was painfully shocked.

"Sallie," she said, suddenly pressing her to herself with an almost convulsive pressure, "don't I know you, darling? And I love you more foolishly, more desperately, perhaps, than any man could do!"

"I wish I could set a higher value on your good opinion. I wish—oh! I wish I could!" said the girl, passionately, and turned her face to hide the tears, which in spite of her usual self-control, were dimming her eyes. "I wish it

were any longer in my power to do as you think I ought."

She wanted to say a word of excuse, of shame for herself, for the sudden outburst of excitement. But she could not do it, and Miss Armitage was the last to expect any such concession.

* * * * *

The same afternoon, when Aunt Jenny was dozing, Sara rose from her seat by the sofa, and walked to the window. The colours had disappeared, the evening was grey. Sea and sky met, and were lost collectively in a dead, dull, neutral tint. She stood a minute, looked and shivered. A clock struck the hour, and she shivered again.

"Somebody is being born," she thought, "and somebody is dying. It is change and change about in this weary world! What is to become of the superfluous souls? Are they to bring suffering on themselves, as *I* have done?"

She glanced from the outer to the inner world—*her* world. She looked at her black dress, and at the sick woman on the sofa, who would be

willing enough to comfort her with her hackneyed little pieces of philosophy, which, dear and good as she was, always made her impatient, and reminded her of the mild platitudes of Tupper, and then she thought involuntarily of the "set grey life" which lay before her, stale, sapless, and unprofitable, to be followed, in due course, by the "apathetic End."

A pier-glass, which was hanging in the room, reflected her features. The sight gave her no pleasure. She knew that she was dependent on her beauty for the enjoyment of her life, and felt what a poor thing it was to be dependent on.

"Is he like the rest?—is Mr. Routh like the rest of them?" she thought cynically to herself. "Valuing me merely for a tolerable outside, and not caring whether the soul within be desecrated. Well, perhaps Aunt Jenny was right; perhaps I could bear anything better, even the excitement which does me harm, than a creeping tortoise-sort of a life; and, after all, it doesn't matter—no one cares."

Just then Miss Armitage stirred in her sleep,

and muttered, as she sometimes did. Sara distinctly heard the words,

“Have you—forgotten,—dear,—there is God?”

She started, too quick-witted not to comprehend the significance of the speech.

“Dear old castle-builder,” she thought, with a sigh. “Does she imagine that I can ever come to be really glad at heart? Has my passion gone so deep with her that she remembers it in her sleep?”

CHAPTER XXI.

THE next day Sara and Lawrence Routh took a lonely walk on the beach beneath the west cliff, by the sea shore, together.

The, "yeasty" surges were tumbling and dashing in upon the rocks, the "white horses" were glancing up and down; but there was still a wide margin of shingle which would remain for more than an hour uncovered by the waves. A pallid light was on the wilderness of waters, which, except where its monotony was varied by the breakers, remained of a dull purplish grey. The sky was cloudy; with great fleecy deeply-toned cumuli, and scarcely distinguishable patches of blue.

Mr. Routh was unlike himself, striving to keep up a show of attention to the outward objects

to which he was supposed to attend ; yet starting every now and then, and relapsing into fits of silence. His proud self-restraint, his habitual reticence had gone. Pagan he might be still, but his struggles had told on him. He was less worthy than he had been to emulate the colossal times of fabled antiquity. Once or twice he lifted his hat, and bared his heated forehead to the pure cool breeze.

Sara saw that his hand shook as he did so. She comprehended the full significance of the position. But her manner was clear and imperious as ever, with no shadow of consciousness about it. He bitterly remembered his fifty years, and fancied that, if he had been an octogenarian, she could not have looked at him with less embarrassment. He could not be blind to her rigidity and pallor, or to the signs of the past tragedy in every feature of her face ; which strangers did not see, but which was legible enough to the eyes skilled from custom to read it. He resented it ; he was indignant with it, rather than with her. What was it he said to himself—pride,

temper, caprice, hysteria, womanish self-will ? She had everything to make her happy ; why on earth should she be miserable ?” He could find names enough to stigmatize an unusual moral condition which baffled his acuteness, and which he could not explain. He thought “ there is a sort of *noli me tangere* about her still. She smiles, but it is so stale and worn a way of smiling, that I could rather a thousand times have her grave or gloomy. I remember the time when the sparkle of her talk was flung off as easily as the jets of spray in these waves around us. Her step is cold and languid. I remember when she was so merry-hearted and light-footed, that she would have sprung up and down these rocks like a lapwing.”

He sighed. The time had come of which he had always dreamt. The time for which he had manœuvred and schemed ; so much so that, if this proud self-absorbed woman could have known his schemes, she would certainly have resented the wily influences he had employed. The time had come ! The golden apple of his

desire lay almost in his hand. Had he left his fruit to ripen too long? Should he dare to touch it, and find decay at the core? No, he tried to recall the story of Pygmalion, which he had heard in his boyhood, and wondered how he should wake this woman of stone into life.

They walked on in silence. Once or twice Sara stopped to pick up a shell, to trail a long bit of seaweed lazily after her; or to watch a wave which was attempting to overleap its barrier, and was dashing its heart out against the unmoving rock. The fresh breeze was blowing on their faces. The cumuli had become jagged at the edges, and were being driven in a wrack across the sky.

"Are you cold?" he asked her presently. "Delicate people oughtn't to expose themselves to these biting winds," and he tried to draw her shawl tenderly round her.

"If my looks say I am delicate, they belie me," she answered, with a touch of that strange irritability which she was always betraying; and speaking rather to herself than to him, as she

gazed beyond the expanse of water at the distant grey sea-line, beyond which the ocean rolled vaster still, fathomless and interminable. "I feel as if I can expose myself to anything. I don't believe in people dying who never have lived—at least beyond a day or two of their lives—real stirring, earnest existences. They go on in a sort of vegetable state, which must be conducive to longevity."

It was not a very prosaic answer. He did not quite know what to make of it, or how to give it a favourable twist which should answer his purpose. So they walked on again silently as before, he giving a savage swing with his stick, which cut some of the little seaweeds asunder, and sent the pebbles flying about his feet; and she knowing in her secret heart that the crisis of her fate was at hand, and yet trying perversely to persuade herself that he was thinking of some problem in law—some difficult case on which he had staked his reputation. In her childhood and girlhood she remembered that she had always respected these vacant,

musings of his, and, with the force of old habit upon her, she walked quietly by his side, not dreaming of interrupting or speaking to him now.

The wind had risen, but he did not hear it. He heard nothing but the deafening voices within. A few drops of rain were beginning to fall; but he did not know it. He forgot his anxiety about Sara's delicacy, as he suddenly stood still and let them splash on her face. All the forces of his being, all the pent-in passions of years, and all the longing, which he had tried to subdue, but which still burnt on unconsumed in his age, was suddenly concentrated into one great effort.

"Be my wife, Sara," he said, in a voice which was hoarse and labouring with the restraint which he had put upon himself to make it composed. "I do not ask you for your love. Give me the right to protect you. I shall not have lived in vain——"

The woman roused from her apathy, and suddenly met his eyes with her long level look.

She felt a throb of pity for him, and knew perfectly well that pity was dangerous. No sort of periphrasis had hitherto been possible to him ; but now when he saw that she hesitated, he endeavoured to call all the well-known resources of special pleading to his assistance.

“ My love is not one to be despised,” he continued. “ Words are cold ; I cannot tell you of it. But do you think that I have passed—that anyone could pass—the whole of a dreary lifetime without getting a glimpse of the mystery of love ? I have waited in loneliness, in darkness, for years !” he hesitated, as if his memory was failing him. “ Have I not felt like an alien whilst others were in bliss ? That picture of Bryan Maxwell’s, ‘ Outside,’—do you remember it ?—represented my state. If you could have raised the cup of happiness to your lips, have drained it to the dregs without me, I might have been content to watch. But now that you are unhappy, I dare to come to you ! I might not have ventured to come to you before.”

Her heart smote her for her ingratitude, as she

listened to his words. Was she not unwomanly indeed? hard as adamant and impervious as iron, that no chord should be stirred within her, no pulse slightly quickened by an appeal like this? And yet; he had deserved better of her. Stern as he had been to others, had he not always been tender and considerate to her?

“To love me,” she thought, “with such patience as this; to love me when he has seen me at my very worst! Such love as this is no beggar’s pittance,”—she did not dare to insult him by undervaluing it.

He saw that she continued to hesitate, and went on in the same strain,

“I am not particularly likeable, I know; but at least I have not frittered my heart away in nineteenth century fashion. I have never cared for any other woman.”

She looked at him still with the same steady look; but he noticed that the corners of her mouth were drawn down, and saw now what made the difference in the altered face, where the melancholy of the liquid eyes and the merri-

ment of the mouth had formerly continually contradicted each other.

"There are a few people in the world whose good opinion I value," she said, "and I wish to retain yours, if I possibly can. My best chance of doing so is to remain as I am. Let it be a dream that you have ever thought of me; I should only ruffle your placidity if I were to marry you."

"There is a kind of imperfection that pleases me," he answered.

"By-and-by you will regret it."

"Is it because of your youth?" he asked, pressing her unwilling hand to his lips. "I am sorry for your sake for the disparity of years."

"My youth!" she repeated. "Do you mean *me*?" she said, looking at first a little astonished, and then breaking into what seemed like a mocking laugh. "Mr. Routh, my wrinkles are within. I feel as if I had lived for thousands of years!"

The mists of loneliness and depression, which

had been clearing a little with the light of hope, seemed to be enveloping him again; he did not answer for a minute. He was thinking—did not her case almost resemble one of mental disorder? How could he help her to throw off these unhealthy fancies? He looked at her again, with eyes that pierced her through and through; and the havoc, worked in the hardened outlines and changed expression of her fair face, came home to him more startlingly than ever.

“For Heaven’s sake!” he exclaimed suddenly, “don’t talk in that morbid way—it is irrational and unnatural. People will think you are mad. I cannot bear to hear it!”

“Am I morbid?” she said quietly. “I don’t pretend to be reasonable. These thoughts come and go unconsciously. I am bound to tell you of them. I must not deceive you,” she continued, still looking at him; but,—was it the rain that had been falling, or were those tears glittering on her eyelashes? “If I marry you, it will be merely because I am weary

of this life, sick of this no-existence, this awful monotony. I do not picture happiness for myself in the world ; but I should like a breathing space to recover my natural self. I have had enough of the thrills of joy, enough of the stings of sorrow. I want a sense of relief and rest. Do you understand ? I have no love to give to you. What can be the result, to you, of such a marriage ?”

What, indeed ? Did a voice from out of the “phantom years” echo her words ? Did he feel again, in the very hour of plucking, that this was dead sea fruit, already yielding ashes, that he had hoped and waited and willed—in vain ?

David and Solomon had all they wished for ; yet, at different periods of their histories, they were two of the most wretched of men.

The tide was coming in ominously over the shingle, the gulls were calling to one another, the waves were beginning to be lashed into fury, and there was every prospect of a stormy night. Mr. Routh and his ward heard the noise

of the seething waters, with the dull, startled roar of the troubled sea, and almost instinctively they turned.

Sara drew her veil over her averted, perturbed face, as the wind moved the low clouds over the sky, and blew chill and blustering, making her shiver. She looked a little nervously at the scowling sky, and at the waves which were already arching themselves into crystal walls, breaking with crashes on the shingle, and hiding everything in showers of spray. Unconsciously she quickened her walk, and, in spite of the boast about the excellence of her constitution, submitted to have her shawl drawn a little closer, as Lawrence Routh bent over her and repeated,

“Be my wife. I will take the risk.”

She knew that her arm was being drawn within his, and suffered it to remain there, walking on in a dull, despondent silence. The rain was beginning to fall now in a steady down-pour, and it was well for him that he could not see her strange, set, colourless face. It seemed

to her as if she were meeting the inevitable—as if she had known from the first that things would arrange themselves like this. She was walking on to her fate. They had come to a mutual understanding, which needed no more words to explain it.

* * * * *

About seven weeks later there was an advertisement in the *Times*.

“On the 25th inst. (December), at —, by —, Lawrence Denison Routh, of —, Sussex Gardens, Hyde Park, and —, Hart Street, to Sara, only daughter of the late Bernard Trevanion, of — Hertfordshire.”

And a week later the same paper had another entry amongst the births.

“On the 2nd inst., the wife of Bryan Maxwell, of ‘The Towers,’ —shire, of a son.”

CHAPTER XXII.

TWO months later, in a little sanctum in "The Towers," which Charley insisted on calling Bryan's "study,"—forgetting, with the fond inconsistency of woman, that every form of studying had been forbidden to her husband—two men were closeted together. One was the master of the house, and the other, Lawrence Routh,—in his character of legal adviser. The table was strewn with papers, deeds, and a will, freshly made.

Mr. Routh, who had heard the most dismal accounts of Bryan Maxwell's health, was startled to find that there was no tinge of melancholy, no querulousness about the man, who had been compelled to surrender the ambitions of his life, and to submit himself to what seemed to the

lawyer to be the most miserable of all states—that of chronic invalidism. Bryan looked better than he had expected to see him. After all, the ease of rest had proved satisfying to him, and the release from bodily pain was a still greater satisfaction. The exuberant life of others did not seem to weigh upon him with any painful sense of contrast. His clear grey orbs were honest and tolerant as ever, and the old happy smile had returned to his face.

“Yes,” said Lawrence Routh to himself, after eyeing him critically, “a sensitive man—a religious man—the merest stranger might see that at a glance. It is implied in his organization, in the eddies of his blood and in the conformation of his brain. Had he been born a Mahometan or a Buddhist, he must still have been religious—perhaps a dancing Dervish—or a Fakeer; who can tell about these things? Love, reverence, and all the species of that genera are inseparable from his being. But I—I am differently made—” and he ended abruptly, remembering how a short time since he

had hated this man, with the old savage instinct of a raging, consuming jealousy.

"After all, the prospects of my child will not be so very bad?" said Bryan interrogatively—breaking in upon the lawyer's reverie.

"No, no," answered Lawrence Routh, turning again to the pervading litter of papers, and waiting for a minute to re-consider and calculate in his cool methodical manner,—“you have done much to clear the estate, in a wonderfully short time. In a few years it may be altogether free from mortgage and loan. I always thought the property might be susceptible of considerable improvement, but it must have been a very difficult task for you to put things so thoroughly in working trim.”

“There was only the *prima facie* difficulty of getting rid of the idle and drunken tenants, and deciding arbitrarily on the new relations of landlord and tenant. But mere threatening availed in most of the seemingly desperate cases; we have not had to resort to very severe measures. It was a miserably shortsighted

policy, even as far as his own pocket was concerned, which my poor brother adopted. If you want to make your poorer neighbours honest and true, you must trust them as well as help them, and you must teach them also to trust you. This is a materialistic, harsh, grinding age; harsh especially to those who supply its wants by labour," continued Bryan, warming to his subject.

Mr. Routh gave a sort of grunt, a grunt which might have been taken for assent or dissent, whichever way you might choose to take it. His face did not supply any commentary upon the grunt.

"I suppose you would say that it is better to have some form of faith than none," continued Bryan, his enthusiasm by no means damped by the grunt. "You and I don't agree in many things, but surely you must admit it to be a condition, a *sine qua non* of nobleness, that a man should attempt to rise to a higher level than himself. Now you know we found Collingford stagnating in that sort of evil which may be

best described as a negation of all goodness—a deprivation of all truth.

It was not so bad a state of things, perhaps, as might have been expected, considering the utter ignorance, the desperate heathenism of the people. The reason I enter into this is just because I must remind you that, as the Rector is old, the patronage of the living falls to me, and, in the event of my decease, to my wife in the interests of my son. It is she who meanwhile will have to teach Christianity—she has done so already, I think, by her example. If I could count upon life, I would undertake to let you see the land, after a time, let out to thrifty tenants, and paying as well as any land in England.” He concluded with a beaming face, rubbing his hands together with undisguised joy at the lawyer’s acknowledgment of the success of his projects.

“You talk of your death very quietly,” said Mr. Routh, still eyeing the man keenly to whom human life had been no sad and lonely mystery, and to whom Death was no terrible plunge into the dark,

but simply an entrance into a Father's home:—he wished to see how much of this was real. "We all know how you have fought with difficulties, and—forgive me for saying so—how nobly you have struggled where many another would have succumbed. I see no need to talk so quietly of the possible failure of all your efforts. You may have years of usefulness still before you."

"Perhaps, and perhaps not," answered Bryan, quietly. "After all, what difference does it make? Thirty or forty years, and the mystery must be solved for most of us. It is God's instant which men call years. I am not going to pretend to a willingness to leave this life which I have—lately at least—found rich and satisfying beyond my expectation, before I am called to do so. We have all heard of men whom the joy of dying has literally kept alive, proving for a time a stimulant to life."

"Mere fanaticism," interrupted Lawrence Routh scornfully.

"I did not say they were fanatics. But I

was going to add that I am not one of those men. I have formed ties which bind me to life, which would be terrible to break. And the doctors say a winter or two abroad may set me going. It was too late to go this year, or we talked of Nice. The prospect of such a change was pleasant enough, I assure you. I am afraid idleness has quite demoralized me. I am not near the man I was.—But that good fellow Frank Dillon mistook the cause of our hesitation—he suspected we wanted funds. I must tell you how he burst in upon us one day with the news that I was going suddenly to set the world on fire, and that fifteen hundred pounds had been offered for the last of my unfinished pictures. As if he didn't know I should instantly detect the ruse;—that it was he himself who had offered the money.”

“Did you get him to confess it? He can well afford it. Few generous men are such Croesuses as Frank Dillon.”

“I couldn't possibly take a fancy sum for my picture—a sum which had not been earned in

the legitimate way, when he had done so much for me already. The worst of it was that my wife was laughing and crying by turns, and it was painful to disabuse her of the pleasant delusion. When I tried to do so, Dillon got behind her, and made such abominable faces at me, as to emulate Garrick himself."

"Well, I am glad to see you so cheerful," said Lawrence Routh, rising to go. "Cheerfulness in illness gives the best hope of cure; it is worth all the drugs in the pharmacopœa."

Sick men are privileged, and the lesson of sickness had done a good deal to dissipate Bryan's reserve.

"The apophthegm holds good," he said, "for you as well as me. Routh, I wish I could see you really happy, with happiness independent of external circumstances." And he looked earnestly at his friend, with a face inspired, as if the flame of inward emotion were permitted to play over and glorify his pale features:

"Humph," said the lawyer, not best pleased at this unexpected invasion on his personality.

"Happiness is a mere question of words. Put most people's happiness to the crucible and it is gone. It generally consists in a negative state, the mere absence of care. You are happy in your way; I am content in mine. 'Tis with our judgment as our watches, none go just alike, but each believes his own."

Bryan did not pursue the subject, but alluded again to his anxiety about the will.

"It can be done in a few days; it is simple enough in all conscience, you don't suspect me," added the lawyer with a sort of smile (Bryan's *bonhomie* was infectious), "of wanting to make a lucrative thing out of it?"

"No—I must be patient. I never despaired of securing a moderate competency for my child if I had only time. But the question is now what rate of interest will be safest for the future prospects of my son, with the old debts only just clearing off? Routh," he said suddenly, as if recollecting it, "before you go, tell me—won't you?—why did you refuse at first to be one of the trustees? There is no one to my

mind, who could be a safer guardian of my child's interests—what objection had you?"

There was silence for a minute. Lawrence Routh looked from the sick man to a picture hanging above his sofa, of a fair girl with pale face, and big, true, loving eyes—a picture which reminded of a Scheffer or a Delaroche. It was the first sketch Bryan had made for the more finished study which had been bought by Dillon.

"I was thinking—excuse me,—I have not seen her since she left Curzon Street; but you have mentioned her once or twice. I was thinking of your wife."

"My wife!"—in surprise.

"Yes," said the lawyer, trying to speak differently, but walking to the window, and turning his face away from Bryan. "Ah, you don't understand. Well, never mind, I think I was a fool to suppose——By-the-by, you talk to me about happiness, and you haven't offered me your congratulations;—a breach in your character for gallantry, isn't it?"

"My congratulations!" echoed Bryan, in still greater astonishment.

"To be sure! What, you didn't know that I was married. Where have you lived? It was an eight-days' wonder that an old fellow like myself should carry off the prize after all. What message will you send to Sara?"

"Sara——Trevanion!"

"Sara Routh——It won't make any difference," he added, suddenly turning round with changed voice and gesture. "Shake hands and good-bye, Bryan. Trust me, you and yours shall ever be safe from contamination through me or my belongings."

"I don't fear," said Bryan calmly. "Good-bye——perhaps it will be better for all of us—at least for the present."

* * * * *

After Mr. Routh had gone Bryan deserted the study and the papers, and wandered about the house in search of his wife, whom he found in her bed-room—as usual, playing with her child.

Who is it who says that even a plain woman looks absolutely beautiful, when her face is radiant with unselfish mother-love? I am not sure that I can entirely subscribe to the notion, but I am sure that Bryan was more than satisfied with his choice, as he gazed contentedly at the picture before him.

There was peace and tranquillity expressed in every line of his face, as he followed Charley's movements about the room. He rather liked her unarranged toilette, and careless white wrapper. The thick dark hair made a shade about her delicate face; and one dainty arm was half losing itself in the sleeve as she held up the baby for Bryan's admiration.

"Isn't it rather a bore?" said the father, drawing back, and refusing to take it. "Isn't it sticky-fingered and wet-lipped—a little dribbly nuisance?—and doesn't it 'crumple and rumple' all your gowns?"

"Sticky-fingered and wet-lipped, indeed!" said Charley, indignantly. "I have a low opinion of people who can speak against children."

"I am wonderfully happy," said Bryan, in the same breath. "I wonder if it is happiness which gives me such an enervated feeling, as if rest were delicious, as if I liked to be idle. I don't know what the people mean when they seem to think I need their pity."

It seemed simple, and yet a miracle, that he should be so resigned—that there should be no languor or melancholy, no hopeless monotony in his life.

Only two months ago things had seemed to be so dark. He remembered a day when he had been wheeled into this very room, unable, through his utter prostration, to stand, and had gazed for a few minutes at his wife and new-born child. Charley was sleeping with her face pale but composed, and her arms clasped round the infant which lay on her bosom. A sigh, almost a groan, had burst from him as he looked. But she never knew it; she, who had whispered to him a few days afterwards, when she was scarcely conscious of what she was saying,

"You are my husband—you will be mine for ever and ever. A hundred deaths could not loosen a link of the chain that binds us."

CHAPTER XXIII.

BRYAN continued to be so much better, that the necessity for wintering abroad was deferred to another year : and no one opposed the expression of his wish to visit town for a few days in the following May, to be present at the exhibition of his last pictures. He was still an enthusiast for his art ; perhaps it was his one weak point that he was over-anxious for the success of the efforts which were to be his last.

“I would rather keep him away,” said the little wife anxiously. “I was so thankful for the short winter days, and the hours of darkness ; when he could not even venture near the room which used to be his studio. I was always a little jealous of that painting.”

But, in accordance with the medical advice,

she determined not to thwart him. They went to London by easy stages—(“Travelling *en prince*” Bryan called it, laughing, when some knitted contrivance of Charley’s was muffled about his throat, and his legs were carefully covered up with carriage rugs.) He had been confined to the house for some months, and absolutely revelled in the beauties of the outer world. The young green of the saplings, the white petals of the pear-trees, the scarce unfolded pink of the apple-blossom, and the woolly buds of myriads of half-opened leaves, appeared to him like new marvels of Creation. He declared he felt as if the circulating sap was invigorating his own veins with a fresh sense of being; whilst he rhapsodized on the freshness of the breeze and the colour of the sky, as only an invalid who had been debarred for a time from these pleasures could possibly have done.

There seemed to be a subtle charm about everything to him—every chord within him was vibrating to the sense of beauty around him, and every nerve seemed to be sympathiz-

ing with the fulness of a life that had been silently preparing all these months of a death which had only been apparent—an intermediate sleep.

“I am like a blind man seeing colour for the first time. The land seems to be suddenly flooded with sunshine. I wish I could write a chorale of light—a symphony of shade; I am afraid it sounds like bombast,” he exclaimed, with all the enthusiasm of a schoolboy, as they took the drive to Collingford, which they had taken the year before.

“What a child it is!” said Charley, patronizingly. “Well, I suppose it is a little better than being shut up in one room. How you used to nod over the novels I chose for you, and pretend you were reading them, when all the time you were peeping over the pages at Boy.”

“There was something else besides ‘Boy’ better worth looking at; and now and then, when you thought I wasn’t noticing it, I saw a naughty, woe-begone face, that I hope to see no longer. The first song I shall make you

sing will be 'Away dull care;' and we must have some singing soon, little wife, from your lips. What colours!—what scents!—what a medley of sights and sounds! Look at the distant ridges of those hills melting away into burnished lilac! Look at the clouds like peaks of snow! There's nothing like being ill for opening a fellow's dull eyes."

"Your eyes were always more open than other people's."

"No, I don't think they were, or they are more open now. Is it not wonderful, after all, how blessings may come to us in the garb we never bargained for? They knock at our doors in black trailing garments; we open, and our expected sufferings are transmuted into joys."

She did not answer. Bryan's enthusiasm raised him on a platform a good deal above her. She was not yet ready to admit that suffering could be so easily brought to a climax in joy.

"I see you think," he said, a little damped by her silence, "that idleness has demoralized me,

made a fool of me. I am not near the man I was, in some ways, I know—”

He couldn't finish his speech, for the case was becoming serious. Charley's slim little fingers were placed on his lips, and her voluble disclaimer “No—no—NO,” *forte-fortissimo*, was rising to such a pitch that the driver might have heard it.

“Hush! hush!” he said, smiling, and freeing himself gently from the little Quaker-gloved hand; “if I *do* have to end my days in an idiot asylum, I see I must accuse you of having hastened the catastrophe. Most men are made fools of by their wives, one time or another.”

They went that night to the house of a friend; and, on the morning of May 3rd, Bryan set off with Charley to visit the Exhibition. The place was densely crowded. They passed through the rooms, in search of a small, unpretending landscape—the very last picture which Bryan had painted. “Wife's portrait” was well hung, and so was the “Hypatia;” but Charley knew that the same melancholy interest did not attach to

these paintings as to the little one on which Bryan had been most actively engaged when the use of his brush had been forbidden to him for ever.

They found it at last, huddled with many others in the octagon-room.

It was a sea-piece. Bryan did not often paint landscapes; and, it must be confessed that, when he did so, he could not have produced the elaborate geological and botanical studies, which are characteristic of our English art. He might rather have been accused of practising the French system, and endeavouring to make nature subservient to some intense sentiment of his own. He wedded the scene to his own rich fancy, his poet's thought.

This sea-piece was full—as all his later pictures were—of quiet, restrained power, which, if it did not arrest the sympathies of the many, could not fail to enchain the hearts of the few. Bryan's art was not merely the reproduction of effects which could be sensible to the most untutored perception. It was something infinitely more—a delicate insight into the innate mean-

ing of things, a glorification of some feeling which words could not have expressed.

In the dim distance of this sea-piece thunderous clouds were rolling over a swirling mass of blackened waters, where a stranded vessel was sinking, every plank forced and straining, every inch of canvas torn. In the foreground there was a slant rent in the sky, and a gleaming line of light, cleaving the murderous shadows, fell concentrated on the figures of two men rowing in a lifeboat from the sinking ship.

Turning to the name of the picture in the catalogue, you saw that the artist had called it "Into haven."

It was not a painting to attract much notice, except from those who could appreciate the marvellous shimmer of light in that break between the clouds, and the effect which depended principally upon the mysterious gradation and evanescence of interfused tints. But there was such an unutterable tenderness about it, suggesting strangest and saddest meanings, that, if you once began to notice it, you could not

look at it long without being almost surprised into tears.

"Bryan will be disappointed," thought his appreciative wife. "Nobody seems to care about it; and he thought it the best thing he ever painted. Oh! how can people be so blind and dull!"

But, as Bryan stood for a few minutes with a last sad look at the picture which, as his wife rightly guessed, he considered to be his masterpiece, Charley noticed a lady who moved in front of them, and stood intently gazing at it. She was very tall, and richly dressed, with a strange picturesque grace about her that attracted all eyes, a fact to which she seemed to be utterly indifferent. Her heavy lace veil was suddenly raised, and Charley started eagerly and suddenly forward. The face disclosed was very beautiful; a face she had known and loved—when it was—oh! how different, to what it was now. The girlishness had quite gone out of this face; happy youth and bright hope had fled from it for ever. Unrest was there, discon-

tent, and pride, with something of haughtiness in the assurance of the manner.

"Bryan," Charley said, drawing back, and looking the other way, while she attempted to speak lightly, "don't you think we had better be going? I know you are sensitive about being caught hovering in the neighbourhood of your brain-children, and we have been here for five or six minutes."

The sudden excitement in his wife's manner, and the unusual jar in her voice, arrested her husband's attention. He looked about him for the explanation of her nervousness, and his eyes, for the last time on earth, rested on the face of the woman who had exercised so important an influence over his fate.

"Stay," he said, suddenly, repeating Charley's start, and becoming deadly white.

Bryan never acted; and, if he could have done so, it would have been impossible for him to appear unconscious of this presence. He stood for another minute rooted to the spot, giving a last long look at the face which was so

accustomed to be stared at by men, that it was unabashed and self-confident with the bearing of a queen, but not of a blushing girl. He searched it with his eyes anxiously through and through; but the expression was impenetrable: he could not read what he wanted. Perhaps it was prouder than ever, perhaps colder; with the smile neither of peace nor of pleasure, the hard stereotyped smile which still parted her lips. He took in the arched neck, the lurking sparkle of haughty defiance in the eyes, and the firm contour of the face, which was more like tinted marble than a specimen of pure sculpture. He comprehended, as his wife had done, the full significance of these things, gave a sigh, and turned away his head.

Charley put her arm in his, and felt him tremble as he turned. She was ashamed of herself for being inclined to chafe at this trembling, as she met the look of pity and sadness in his eyes.

"It is fatality," she whispered. "We could not guess that she would be here."

Meanwhile Sara still stood before the picture, unconscious of the neighbourhood of the head and hands which had created it, and which (she had heard all the story) would never create anything again. Lawrence Routh was a successful man, and his rich young wife was very popular. She was surrounded, as usual, by people of her own "set," to use the ignominious slang of our day. But for once she forgot to smile assent on their observations.

"Into haven," she read the name of the picture, which she had purposely come into the octagon room to see. It was not on the line; one needed to stoop down to get a good look at it. This was fortunate for Mrs. Routh, since the picture touched some mysterious link in the chain of memory.

"A poet's dream," she thought, and a sudden flood of feeling swept her face. She too had had her dreams, her "little sentimentalisms," her "small enthusiasms," as she called them now. But the world had treated them with ridicule, and now she could laugh at her own

absurdity. She threw up her head with her old proud gesture, and moved down the room, followed—as married women are not ashamed to be now—by men who slighted girls to win Mrs. Routh's favour. One carried her catalogue, two more,—hooked together as a sign of their superiority to most of the surroundings,—dragged languidly after her, ostentatiously parading their well-bred indifference and aristocratic exhaustion.

“Who's that?—what a bewitching creature! A Greek might demur to some of the outlines, but I'd wager anything his Venuses did not come up to that colouring,” said a young artist excitedly, looking after the procession.

“That's Routh's wife—do you know him? Capital fellow! By Jupiter! she looks proud, and no mistake! Sooner he than I——”

Bryan smiled rather absently, as he listened to the remarks of two of his friends. He did not feel inclined to respond to either sentiment, but looked from the woman who had been

called "bewitching," to his own serene, patient-browed, gentle wife,—Charley with the dove-like voice,—Charley with the ox-like eyes, which made amends for the small unimportant face. He looked tenderly, protectingly, at the small, fragile, fairy-like thing, and thought how he liked the quietness and simplicity of her mode of dressing, and how he began to have a dislike to the rustle of silk. "But why," he thought, "was she sitting so pale and silent, giving little heed to what was passing around her? Was it possible that she had been afraid of this meeting? If so, it was better over. Did she not know that, if she had had nothing else to recommend her, her true nobility of soul and her loving, patient self-abnegation were infinitely preferable to all mere material beauty?"

* * * * *

Bryan wrote a note that evening, and took from his portfolio a carefully-executed sketch of his last picture, rolling it up with the note.

"Charley," he said to his wife, as she nestled beside him, her head on his breast, "when the

time comes that we must part" (she started and shivered)—"I did not say it would come soon; but you know, darling, we are none of us immortal; we must make provisions for that day——"

He waited. But she only bowed her head, knowing and understanding that more might be implied in his words than he actually said.

"Charley, you must let me speak of it. I think we shall both of us be happier when we face it. Do you think bodily presence makes so great a difference when the life of the soul is one? Do you not know that we shall be reunited? You will be near me. I shall feel you with me still. Darling, I remember your reminding me once how entirely you believed in the "communion of saints." She looked up at him now with her clear luminous eyes, and it seemed to her that, as the light of the sunset shone full upon him, there was a glow as of rapture in his face. Could she dare to interfere with the calm of this great peace, to interpose the shadow of her selfish repinings?

"My beloved!" she said. Her breath came quickly as she softly whispered the accentuated word.

He drew her closer, and she continued aloud—her eager eyes shining with reproachful meaning.

"Don't you know it would have been more blessed for me to have been your wife—if only for a few months—than to have lived a whole lifetime with any one else? If I had been told that you would have died in a week, don't you know that I would still have married you?"

There was a little pause—one of those intense pauses which the clock may chronicle by instants, but which seem to us afterwards like hours of existence. He folded her in his arms and held her, heart to heart.

"Wife," he said, after a minute, in a tone which strangely quieted her eager, impassioned voice, "when I think of the parting which one day must come, I think of it as if our hands might be separated for a little while in a crowd, to be joined again at the end of the day. Per-

haps God may please that it may not be for long—My work," he continued dreamily, "is apparently unfinished, my training only just begun. I have not been suffered to open men's eyes to the beauty in God's world which has flooded my own soul. Perhaps I have thought too much of the mere physical beauty; perhaps it was better for me to be undeceived. And yet when I am gone, dear, will you send this to—"

"Yes."

"But you have not heard to whom?"

"I know, darling—I will send it to Sara—Mrs. Lawrence Routh. Poor Sara!"

"She used to have a heart, but her best instincts have been warped—you must not judge of her as you see her now. I would make an effort to wake that heart; I would appeal once more to her sense of duty," said Bryan, slowly and thoughtfully.

"I know," whispered the little wife, with tears in her eyes. "She loved you once—I could love her for that. But what's the good of it? I can't help her. Poor Sara!"

“Poor Sara!” This of the woman she had seen that morning in the splendour of her magnificent beauty, her wealth, her pride; the woman who, in human probability, had years of life before her with her husband!

This, only this, spoken from the depths of her full heart; the heart of the wife who feared that in a very short time she might be alone again in the world.

But no one who knew her would have said, “Poor Charley!”

THE END.

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